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THE POTTER'S HOUSE

A NOVEL

BY
ISABEL C. CLARKE



NEW YORK, CINCINNATI, CHICAGO

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THE POTTER'S HOUSE

CHAPTER I

THE January sunshine spun golden webs as it glanced fitfully upon the Thames, illuminating the dingy wharves and warehouses on the southern side of the river, and enfolding the long grey line of the Embankment in its subdued radiance. Down the side streets from the Strand, congested with foot passengers, with newspaper boys, whose posters of varied hues flapped in the chilly easterly wind, and with vehicles of every description, a light dust scattered itself disagreeably. Hurrying people emerged from the Temple Station—a little crowd that melted and dispersed rapidly as it reached the upper air. From afar could be seen the procession of motor omnibuses plying their way down the Strand in fugitive glimpses of vivid arresting scarlet that acquired a new significance and value in the pale winter sunshine.

A motor coming from the Law Courts threaded its way skilfully across the street, slipped down the hill towards the Temple, and was soon travelling with rapidly accelerating speed westwards along the Embankment. One of the occupants, a girl of perhaps twenty years, leaned her head a little out of the window to glance at the ruffled grey and silver of the river, at the avenue of bare plane-trees, at the trams passing to and fro. Her companion, who was a year or two older, had sunk listlessly into the corner of the car as if anxious still further to conceal her heavily-veiled face from the inquisitive eyes of the passers-by. She thought, indeed, that she had never realised the subtle torture that could be summed up in the one word *staring* until the experi-

ence of the last two days. She leaned back, closing her eyes and did not speak; and her attitude, limp and weary, seemed to convey an inarticulate appeal for silence.

Suddenly the girl turned towards her, and laid an abrupt hand upon hers. She suffered the touch without remonstrance, and the slight, shrinking movement she betrayed was evidently unobserved.

"So that's over, darling. How thankful you must be!"

Gillian Driscoll did not answer. The expressed sympathy produced an inward recoil, just as the touch of the hand that still clasped hers had evoked the physical shrinking. Her face behind the veil was white, and her features, small, regular, and delicate, were as little expressive of any emotion, whether of thankfulness, relief, or sorrow, as those of a mask. Indeed her mind was curiously blank, and if she had been capable of any definite feeling it would have been that of a slight irritation towards the girl whose adoring eyes betrayed her sympathetic devotion. She desired only to be alone, but the effort of ridding herself of Joan Pallant promised an exertion to which she felt singularly unequal. She therefore endured in silence.

"You looked simply splendid, Jill!"

Splendid? Almost, the word provoked a smile—the slight ironical smile of the woman clever enough to analyse the measure of her own disillusionment. Splendid . . . splendid . . . the thrumming of the engines seemed to roll out the word with mocking, rhythmic reiteration. She, who had drunk deep of the cup of humiliation, who had seemed to herself soiled beyond all hope of purification, had taken refuge behind the wall of her pride, and she had looked in Joan's eyes splendid. What a word to use for a woman in her position, who through no

fault of her own had been dragged in the unspeakable dust of her husband's dishonour. Across the pause that followed, some words of his came back to her: "What a little fool Joan is!" They even seemed to give her courage now to endure Joan's undesired presence and sympathy.

Did the girl imagine perhaps that her friendship might presently acquire a new value from her own changed position—that she would be admitted to a closer intimacy? The wife of Aylmer Driscoll, the distinguished poet and dramatist, had perhaps not always been accessible, for in their own circle her popularity was scarcely less than his own. Now, as the deserted woman, doubly betrayed by husband and friend, driven by circumstances to divorce him and expose to public view the precise measure of her misery and humiliation, she would no doubt find herself abruptly fallen from the old pedestal, from the second niche, as it were, in the temple, and might even become a prey to idle Joans and insignificant humble worshippers.

The scenes of the past two days passed rapidly before her eyes. Often she had seemed to herself to be one of the figures of a dream—a bad but wholly unreal dream. She could always be silent; it was easy for her not to speak; the real hurt came when speech was compulsory, when her wound had to be made public. To her the story was no new one. She had known for two years her husband's diminishing love, so incredibly, monstrously changed from the ardour of the honeymoon nearly four years ago in wonderful days of June so different from the winter ones which had seen the final act of the piteous little drama. She had known intuitively, could almost have given a date to the change, but she had not guessed then at the identity of the third person. She had been so blind, so slow to see. Hers

was a nature incapable alike of suspicion or jealousy. Least of all had it ever occurred to her to suspect Deborah Venning, her own friend, the friend of her girlhood.

And it was for Deborah's sake that she had yielded to Aylmer's fierce entreaties that she should divorce him. But he had never mentioned her. He believed that Gillian was still ignorant. Deborah's name from first to last had never been mentioned; her fair fame had remained untouched by breath of scandal. And even if they sometimes suspected that Gillian had guessed or learned the truth about them they had counted upon her capacity for silence. Deborah, who had demolished so deliberately the palace of her friend's happiness—such a fair and beautiful palace full of the treasures of precious memories both sweet and sad—had known too that she could rely upon the ultimate silence of the woman with whom she had to deal. . . .

When Gillian looked back upon it she saw that Deborah's adoration had been scarcely less slavish than that of Joan. She had been her bridesmaid; she was the first to greet her on her return from her honeymoon, regarding Aylmer, the dispossessor, with a jealous dislike that first amused him and then provoked him to a half satirical endeavour to change it. The precise date of that change Gillian never knew. Deborah had left town, had gone to live in the country with her invalid father, had taken to gardening, and thus had a little disappeared from the horizon. Rumours of her engagement were circulated from time to time, and then as quickly denied. Photographs of her garden frequently found their way into illustrated journals or into those luxurious books on gardening which excite the envious admiration of the amateur.

And Gillian herself had lived in a world apart for

the first two years of her married life. At first she had been wholly enveloped in Aylmer's love; then followed the birth of their only child, a little girl who survived only six months. Prostrated with grief she had for a long time withdrawn herself from all society. When she took up the old life again she found it changed. Aylmer had just achieved a wonderful success with a new book of poems, and she continued to revolve a happy satellite round that strangely shining planet. She had half forgotten Deborah, whom she had seen sobbing wildly at the baby's funeral. She had said to Aylmer when they returned to the drearily silent and empty house, "What made Deborah cry like that? She never seemed to take much notice of Baby. . . ." She, feeling like a stone, had perhaps envied those facile, abundant tears.

Aylmer's answer for the first time had struck a jarring note.

"She has such a very tender heart," he said; "she was crying for our grief. You seem to forget how devoted Deborah has always been to you."

It had faded quickly from her remembrance, that speech, because she was in such grief that her whole world was temporarily darkened. At first she had hoped for another child, but no child came to fill the empty nursery. She roused herself at last, accusing herself of neglecting Aylmer, of flinging him on his own resources for amusement and relaxation, of withdrawing herself too rigorously from all society. . . . How could one expect a man primarily interested in his own poetry, his own career, to continue to grieve for a small baby of six months old?

Gillian, the mother, had felt as if the heart had been torn out of her body.

And now the end. . . . She had looked upon Aylmer's face that day for perhaps the last time.

It was a handsome face, scornful, with brown eyes that almost matched the red-brown hair. Something of Shelley about the lips and brow. Yes, it was a poet's face. She did not love him any more, but she had not yet learned to hate him. She felt herself incapable of emotion or feeling, except that strange and bitter sense of raw, wounded pride. She was as one who stands among the ruins caused by a sudden earthquake and is only concerned because the intimate details of her home have been ruthlessly exposed to public view. The ruins were on such a colossal scale, involving past, present, and future, that even now she could hardly realise their full significance.

The car had passed down the Mall and was nearing Buckingham Palace—freshly, almost insolently white in the glory of its new façade—when she turned with a touch of impatience to Joan. That devotion recalled the days of Deborah's friendship, and Joan was to suffer a little vicariously for evoking its unpleasant memory. Gillian had lost her faith alike in men and women; she saw a potential enemy in every one that approached her. In her heart she blamed Deborah more bitterly than Aylmer.

"I will drop you, Joan," she said, "before I go home."

Joan's face flushed. "Oh, I thought——" she began.

"Not to-day," said Gillian with decision. "I have a great deal to do. I must be alone."

"Oh, but you mustn't tire yourself with business, darling. You'll be ill after this awful trial and strain. . . ."

"Ill? What nonsense! I was never better in my life."

To prevent further discussion she lifted the speak-

ing-tube and in a cold, firm voice directed the chauffeur to drive to Joan's address. A few minutes brought them to Lady Pallant's house in Belgrave Square. The decisive action had succeeded although there were tears in Joan's blue eyes. . . . But of course Gillian was upset, she was not herself. She had borne herself like a heroine all through those dreadful proceedings; she had been, in a word, "splendid." Joan's vocabulary was limited rather than discriminative. In her unaltered loyalty she could make excuses even for this sudden shunting of her own person. Dropping a hasty kiss on Gillian's averted cheek she alighted from the car.

"Home?" she asked interrogatively.

"Yes—home, please," said Gillian's cold, weary little voice.

The motor slid on westward. At the door of an immense block of red-brick flats overlooking Kensington Gardens it once more stopped, and Gillian's slim figure emerged. She paused a moment to give some instructions to the chauffeur, then, without summoning the lift (for was not the porter deeply interested in the case of *Driscoll v. Driscoll?*), she hurried up the single flight of stairs that led to her domain. Once more, after the nightmare happenings of the day, she found herself alone.

The flat held no memories of Aylmer. She had taken it furnished, and had moved into it with a few of her own things when the definite rupture between them had taken place a few months ago. She had not disliked its fashionable, rather banal decorations that were so normal, so utterly lacking in individuality. In London she thought there must be thousands of flats similarly furnished and arranged. It was all done with the taste of the Ideal Home decorator; one could see in exhibitions whole houses furnished to this pattern, each room a little model

of its kind, with nothing superfluous, with the personal note completely absent; with no suggestion of individual taste or preference. Bright and polished, it spoke only of a taste that was professionally artistic—the comfortable refuge of those who fear to exercise their own judgment in such matters as carpets, curtains, wall-papers, and furniture. It was, indeed, just the abode for a woman who had learned to desire only the commonplace. This afternoon its aspect of shining welcome gave Gillian a vague sense of comfort. She took off her hat, and the heavy, suffocating veil, and lay down on the sofa in her drawing-room whose two big windows looked out upon the huge elms and pleasant green sward of Kensington Gardens.

CHAPTER II

GILLIAN had been married to Aylmer Driscoll nearly four years before, from the house of her mother's cousin, Lady Pallant. She was an orphan and a ward in Chancery, and her girlhood had been spent exclusively in Bath with her two elderly unmarried aunts, the Misses Martha and Letitia Stanway, who had a house in Brock Street. When she was eighteen, Lady Pallant invited her to spend the season with her in town.

"If she is as pretty as she promised to be as a little thing," observed Lady Pallant reflectively as she sent the invitation, "I shall get her off my hands before Joan comes out." Lurking in her mind there was perhaps the unexpressed hope that Paul, her only son, might take a fancy to her. She knew to a penny the sum of Gillian's *dot*.

Six weeks later, so rapidly did events succeed one another, Gillian consulted her on the subject of Driscoll's offer of marriage. He was twelve years older than she was, and he looked more. He was a clever, distinguished man with a good private income. Lady Pallant was one of those people who professed not to understand poetry, but she had heard it said that Aylmer's was good. On the whole she approved, and she managed with admirable success to conceal her own disappointment. Gillian's marriage took place in the early days of June. She was attended by four bridesmaids, Deborah Venning, Joan Pallant, then a schoolgirl, and Aylmer's two younger unmarried sisters. Miss Letitia Stanway, who was of an emotional and sentimental disposition, wept audibly during the ceremony in one of the front pews, thereby exciting the contemptuous an-

noyance of Lady Pallant. Gillian held herself like a proud young queen, and looked beautiful. . . .

Now her marriage was at an end—the marriage that was to have lasted all their lives, until death should part them. She had loved Aylmer; she would have gone on loving him if he had let her. Had it been her fault? Had she failed in the essential qualities of a wife—in sympathy, interest, encouragement of that work by which he set so much store? She had been very young, of course, and wholly inexperienced—Joan could have given her points in knowledge of the world. That Bath upbringing had not been an adequate equipment for her future life.

Deborah, her one intimate friend, had always seemed so much more capable and wise than herself; she had always consulted Deborah. It was she who had first drawn Gillian's attention to the fact that Aylmer had fallen in love with her. Deborah had had two proposals, and knew, as she expressed it, the symptoms. She was never greatly in favour of the marriage. Aylmer was not nearly good enough for her darling Jill. She relented, however, when she found that Gillian's affections and vanity were alike stirred by this handsome, clever, and withal ardent lover. Deborah made, so many people said, a strikingly handsome bridesmaid. Joan, in those days a timid worshipper, envied Miss Venning for the closer measure of intimacy and friendship she enjoyed.

What a long time ago it all seemed! In contrast to the pale shy girl who, dressed in white satin and wearing the bride's insignia of orange blossoms in her hair, had promised to love, honour, and obey Aylmer Driscoll, she felt herself to be an old woman. These last few days seemed to have added ten years to her life. As she lay upon the sofa watching the

light fade and fail in the London sky, she looked exhausted, not only with the strain of that so grimly protracted trial as by the continued effort to be self-controlled, an effort which as she had gathered from Joan's exaggerated admiration had been at least partially successful. Yet her part in the proceedings had been very slight; they had spared her all they could. As she was leaving the court she heard a strange woman say: "What a *girl!* She must be older than she looks though, if she's been married four years." She had felt almost grateful to her unknown critic, for she felt a hundred, such an ugly, soiled, withered hundred. . . .

How she had hated that sordid scene, unduly protracted by her trustees on a question of the alimony she was to receive. She had felt soiled all over—she who could remember crying as a little child if she soiled her hands! She had been compelled to look at Aylmer, her own husband who had once loved her, as if he were a stranger, a cruel hostile stranger who could still hurt her although all her love for him had perished when she learned the truth. It had been unbearable. His eyes had searched her face pitilessly—those strange powerful eyes of his. . . . She was thankful to creep away out of his sight. She felt all the time as if her self-control would give way, and she would suddenly hear herself cry aloud: "You know it is all Deborah's doing. . . . Deborah has taken you away from me!" Sometimes the words echoed in her ears just as if she had really surrendered to that mad impulse and uttered them. . . . And she would have been revenged. She would have punished them both, faithless husband and false friend, for their treatment of her, for their hideous perfidy. . . .

But the words had never been uttered, and she had given Aylmer back his freedom, and Deborah's

name had never been mentioned, her fair fame remained untouched.

What a strange world—a world in which she suddenly found herself quite alone. Her child was dead; she could feel almost thankful for that now; a child inevitably complicated the position of divorced parents. She was deserted and abandoned. True, the doors of the little dark grey house in Brock Street were open to her, but she felt that she could not return to the scenes of her girlhood. Her pride forbade it. And she knew instinctively it would have been a grievous trial to the two old aunts. They were terribly shocked as it was, and to have Gillian back in their midst, to be subjected to the inevitable questioning of all their friends, would have been a bitter ordeal.

The day had not fulfilled its earlier promise, and the clouds that had gathered behind Kensington Palace had brought heavy showers of rain. A wind had sprung up and stirred to violent commotion the black lace-like branches of the great elms. Crowded motor omnibuses passed swiftly along the wet and slippery highway, the luckless outside passengers clustering miserably beneath dripping umbrellas.

Gillian had had her tea, and the maid had long ago returned to fetch the tray, on which stood the untasted bread-and-butter and cake that had been prepared for her. Mrs. Driscoll still lay on the sofa idly turning over the leaves of the evening papers. From the pages of each one she saw the hideous headline, "SOCIETY DIVORCE CASE: VERDICT."

There was a ring at the bell; she heard footsteps, a man's voice in the hall. Who could it be at this hour? The clock on the mantelpiece pointed to half-past six. And she had given orders that she would not be at home to any one. Surely no one would dare intrude upon her now. The door opened

and the maid brought in a card and gave it to her. The name brought an angry little flush to her face. Joan, not daring to come herself, had sent an emissary in the person of her brother.

"You must say I can't possibly see any one," she said, rising from the sofa.

"Mr. Pallant says he's come on business, with a very important message from her ladyship, ma'am," said the maid. "He says he won't detain you more than a moment. I told him your wishes, ma'am."

"Very well—I suppose I must see him then."

Gillian went up to the mirror and smoothed her dark hair with her hands. Then turning, she moved forward to greet her visitor.

All her movements were graceful; the lines of her figure were slim, straight, rather fine-drawn; the poise of her little head always gave a touch of arrogance to her mien.

The door had closed upon Paul Pallant. He came up to her and took both her hands in his, swiftly, masterfully.

"I knew you were in," he said in his cool steady voice. "I felt I simply must see you. So I invented that message from my mother. Rather clever of me, wasn't it? Your maid's a bit of a dragon, Jill!"

She did not speak. Across her pain his strong touch comforted her. She had never known Paul very well. She had been too much engrossed in Aylmer during those few weeks she had spent under his mother's roof prior to her marriage to take much heed of the pale taciturn youth who came up for occasional week-ends from Aldershot. But he had always been friendly and pleasant, and once Joan had eagerly repeated to her that Paul had said she was very pretty. Joan always thirsted for corroboration of her own opinion; she did not wish to be the sole worshipper in the temple.

She took her hands away and sat down, turning her face from the light. And Paul stood there, steadily surveying her.

"You have been crying," he said at last, calmly looking down at her.

"I suppose I have," said Gillian weakly.

"Don't—*don't*, Jill," he said.

He spoke as if her tears were swords that pierced him.

"I can't help it. You would cry if you had gone through what I have to-day!"

"No, I should not. I should be too busy killing Aylmer to cry," he said, and his face grew hard.

"Why should you want to kill him? I don't in the least want him to die. Living is so much harder!"

"You're frozen, child," said Paul. "May I make up the fire?"

Before she could answer he was on his knees upon the hearth-rug. He raked out the ashes, put on some lumps of coal, one by one, and watched as the first little grey swirl of smoke gave place to sudden flame. Gillian found herself noting the deft movements of his thin brown hands.

His self-imposed task finished, they sat opposite to each other in silence. Paul Pallant's thin face was a little restless. His eyes were very bright.

"I was not there to-day," he said at last, "although I wished to be. . . . But Joan told me that she went. I hope she didn't worry you most awfully?"

"Oh no," said Gillian. "I'm sorry I couldn't bring her back with me. She wanted to come. But I preferred to be alone."

"I'm afraid I'm not so amenable as Joan," he said quietly, and he looked away from her, his eyes fixed upon the kindling fire. "Let me stay a few

minutes, Gillian." His voice sank to a sudden meekness. "I've been wanting to see you simply frightfully all day."

It struck her that exaggeration of speech must be a peculiarity of the Pallant family. It was certainly not derived from Lady Pallant, whose words were always few and singularly to the point.

Then quite abruptly, without further hesitation or preliminary, Paul said:

"I love you. Didn't you ever guess it? Do you love me, Gillian?"

He stood up now, and his face, always rather emotionless, had grown quite pale.

"I never thought about it. Why should I love you? How *could* I?"

He looked astonished. Was it possible she did not comprehend all the vital significance of his words?

"I love you, Jill," he said again.

"Don't!" And now she lifted up her hand as if in entreaty. "I hate to hear you say it."

The odd and strange whiteness of his face, the blazing darkness of his eyes, alarmed her. "It sounds so—so wrong," she added.

"To-day," he said slowly, "has given me the right to speak."

"Why should it?" she cried petulantly. "To-day hasn't made me any the less Aylmer's wife."

"You are not his wife any more, thank God," said Paul. "In six months you will be absolutely free."

"*Please* don't," she said imploringly. "I feel it is so wicked—so wrong." Her voice was troubled. "Horribly wrong. I have not been at all wicked, and yet I feel so soiled and disgraced. . . ."

In the pause that followed Gillian gathered courage.

"You are almost as silly as Joan," she said, but

the little laugh that followed this speech was unsuccessful.

"Joan!" he said contemptuously, "you are not surely going to compare a schoolgirl's folly with the kind of love I am offering you now!"

"It makes my position all the worse that you should dare to come here like this—and deliberately make love to me!" she declared wrathfully.

But Paul, unheeding, knelt down between her and the fire and possessed himself of her two cold little hands.

"I love you, Jill," he said. "I have waited for to-day for four years."

She wrenched her hands free.

"I won't listen to you! What you say is impossible . . . you are insulting me!"

"Insulting you? When I love you? When I long for the day when I can make you my wife. . . ."

"I shall never be your wife. I am Aylmer's wife."

She had never envisaged the future, nor dreamed that it could hold for her a new love, another marriage.

"Don't speak to me of Aylmer. It makes me want more than ever to kill him!"

He rose and made a few steps abruptly up and down the room. Then he came back to her side.

"And in any case," she went on, "I should never dream of marrying again. I am afraid of love. It can hurt too much. I would far rather be alone . . . without it!"

"You need not be afraid of my love," he said quietly; "I worship you too much!"

She did not speak. She struggled against the slowly growing conviction that his words, his touch, his very presence, were subtly comforting her.

And she had no need of comfort. . . . Her soul

cried out fiercely for solitude. . . . The Pallants were engaged in a conspiracy to deny her that solitude. It only remained now for Lady Pallant to come and offer a few blunt words of sympathy, practical and unimaginative. . . .

"I assure you," she said impulsively, "I had quite as much as I could bear from Joan to-day."

"I'm awfully sorry," he said; "I'm sure she was very trying. But she means well, poor little kid. I'm afraid it runs in the family to be foolish about you."

He had turned her sword against himself.

"You should have sent her off," he added.

She received this advice with a meaning silence.

"She's awfully devoted to you," he went on; "she's taken it very much to heart. . . ."

"Oh, don't I know it? I don't want anybody's devotion—either yours or hers!" She spoke vehemently.

"I'm sure you must be jolly well fed up with life," he said, suddenly breaking into slang that won an unwilling smile from her. "But you'll come and see us whenever you feel inclined, won't you, Jill? The house is your home whenever you choose to make it so. I'm sure my mother would have sent all kinds of messages if she'd known I was coming."

"I'll come and say good-bye," she said, relenting a little. "You see, I've made up my mind to go abroad almost at once. In a few days I shall go to Paris and then to Italy. I thought of starting next Saturday."

"On Saturday? Surely not so soon as that? You don't let the grass grow under your feet, do you?" His tone was slightly hurt. "Why must you be so precipitate?"

"I don't like these cold winter months in England.

It's warmer in Italy. There's more sunshine, and I'm longing to go away to shut it all out. To forget if I can!" She burst suddenly into tears.

"You oughtn't to go alone, anyhow," he said with decision. "Can't you get some friend to go with you? I'm sure Joan would go like a shot if you could get round mother to let her. Or that other friend of yours—Miss Venning?"

"What, *Deborah*?" she almost screamed. "Take Deborah with me?" Her tears threatened now to become hysterical; she continued to sob, uttering broken sentences. "I shouldn't *dream* of taking Deborah with me! Oh, please go away, Paul! I simply can't bear any more. Give my love to Cousin Janet. . . . Say I'll try and come in and say good-bye to her . . . and Joan. And if you care for me, do try and stop Joan from coming here!"

"I say—I'm afraid I've upset you most awfully," he said with contrition. He paused for a moment, wondering if he ought to leave her at once. "Jill," he said, "I can't go away like this—I must know that I'm going to see you again. You must really tell me a little more." His face clouded, and became suddenly gloomy and anxious. "I spoke too soon—and I'm sorry. I might have known you weren't in the mood to listen. But it's too late to take back my words. I love you—and I'm sure I could make you happy—I'm sure I could give you back the happiness you've lost. You'll let me try, won't you—one of these days?"

"No," she said, "I can't say anything now. As I told you just now, I'm afraid of love. I hope I shall never love any one again. And as for marriage, that's quite out of the question."

"Well, I must be content with that, I suppose," he said, smiling.

What a child she was still, with a child's unrea-

soning petulance. A child, too, that had been most cruelly and savagely hurt.

He lifted her hands one after the other to his lips and kissed them reverently. Then he looked steadily into her eyes.

"One of these days, dear Jill . . . " he said.

He left the room so silently she hardly realised that he had gone. *One of these days . . . one of these days. . . .* What a silly thing to say! How could Paul and Joan both be so stupid as to care for her—to make themselves unhappy about her?

"How thankful I shall be to get away from every one," she said aloud to herself as she heard the front door slam. "Especially from the Pallants."

But even as she framed the words she knew that they were not perfectly sincere. She had been very glad of Paul Pallant's company that evening; it had disturbed her, but it had undoubtedly helped her to bear her embittered loneliness.

"And, after all, it might have been Joan!" she said, with a little wry smile.

CHAPTER III

LADY PALLANT wondered why both her son and daughter seemed so nervous and pre-occupied that night at dinner. Joan in particular had red eyes and wore a slightly plaintive and injured expression. She ate little, and the meal was proceeding in silence when this fact of his sister's diminished appetite obtruding itself upon Paul, he made a remark which suggested a clue to the situation.

"Starving, Jo?" he said, in the light ironical tone that always made his sister flinch and turn crimson. "That won't help Gillian, you know!"

At the mention of Gillian's name Lady Pallant looked up from her delicate dissection of a chicken's wing.

"Did you go with Gillian to-day, Joan?" she inquired. She was a handsome woman of about fifty, tall, dark, inclined to be stout. She had rather an imperious air, and was the moving spirit in the household, inspiring both respect and awe.

"Yes, mother," said Joan meekly.

"I told you," said Lady Pallant, "that I entirely disapproved of your going to such a place—of your being seen there at all!"

She had lunched out herself, and so had been unaware that Paul had enjoyed that meal at home in solitary state.

"Yes, mother," said Joan again, scarcely knowing what she said.

She did not dare look up and meet Paul's bitter amused eyes.

"It is a most equivocal position for a young girl," pursued Lady Pallant, who, having had her suspicions confirmed, was determined not to allow the

misdeemeanour to pass unrebuked; "in my young days it would not have been at all *comme il faut* for a girl to be seen in the Divorce Court listening to a case."

Joan was silent.

"I am surprised that you went against my wishes in the matter. In the future I shall have to be more particular in controlling your movements since you are evidently not to be trusted. I must say, too, that I am surprised Gillian allowed it!"

This unexpected attributing of the blame to Mrs. Driscoll aroused Paul from his silence. He looked up sharply.

"Speak up, Jo! Tell mother it wasn't Gillian's fault. You simply insisted upon going, didn't you? You *would* go—she didn't want you a little bit!"

His anger was slightly tinged with jealousy, which made him speak more harshly than perhaps he intended. He had longed passionately to be with Gillian in that evil hour, to stand by her. Every dictate of prudence had compelled his absence. But in the spirit had he not been by her side, holding her two cold little hands in his, even as he had held them to-night? . . .

"No, she didn't want me," Joan confessed; "it wasn't her fault." Remembering the humiliating manner of her peremptory dismissal on the way home, she longed to ask the terrible questions, "Did she tell you so, Paul? Did she say she hadn't wanted me?" But she shrank from the inevitable answer. Paul was not in the mood to spare her.

"I am glad that Gillian won her case," said Lady Pallant. "Of course she behaved very foolishly and imprudently. To shut yourself up for months and months and refuse to see people is not the way to keep your husband."

Paul's eyes flashed.

"Even that isn't any excuse for a man to desert his wife, and behave in the caddish way Aylmer has behaved to her! I always said he was a bounder."

Joan darted a grateful look from misty blue eyes.

"I wonder what Gillian will do," continued Lady Pallant. "She has, fortunately, plenty of money of her own. And then Aylmer will be compelled to pay her the usual proportion of his income."

"If I were Gillian I wouldn't touch a farthing of his money," said Paul; "her trustees insisted upon the alimony—she didn't want it!"

"I am accustomed," said his mother dryly, "to Joan's exaggerated partisanship of Gillian. But from you—Paul——" she stopped and smiled.

"Any man who is worth his salt may be forgiven for expressing himself strongly on the subject of a woman who has been treated as Aylmer has treated her," he retorted.

Again that mute rather pathetic glance of gratitude from Joan.

Lady Pallant felt the implied reproach in her son's tone. She thought to herself: "How dreadfully upset they both are about this affair of Gillian's!" She observed without analysing; recognised a fact, yet exhibiting no desire to deduce reasons for it. Hence she never suspected the true basis of her son's defence of Gillian. Mrs. Driscoll was her cousin, had lived in her house, had been launched by her as one of the prettiest *débutantes* of that season, had met Aylmer under her roof, and had been married from thence. For her these reasons sufficed. She had not the remotest knowledge of her son's attitude towards Gillian. . . .

"I wonder what she will do," said Lady Pallant after a pause, during which neither Paul nor Joan ventured any remark; "do you know what her plans are, Joan?"

"She didn't say," said the girl; "she didn't talk much to-day. I think she was stunned. She wasn't like herself. It's been a great shock to her."

"She means to go abroad almost at once!" said Paul. He betrayed no triumph at this superior knowledge of Gillian's plans. Jealousy touched Joan's heart with its knife, causing a cold sinking sensation. Why had she confided in Paul? When had he seen her? Had she sent for him? She did not dare ask these questions aloud. Paul had always dominated his young sister; he was five years older than she was. Her attitude towards him was a curious mingling of fear and reverence. His words could strike hard, and he had what his mother called the "Pallant temper." They were mutually jealous of each other's friendship for Gillian.

"Abroad? Alone? How unwise!" said Lady Pallant. "I hope she does not intend to go alone. Perhaps she means to take a friend."

Paul vouchsafed no further information.

"Perhaps she will take Deborah Venning with her," said Lady Pallant, "they were always such great friends."

"*Deborah!*" Joan uttered the name below her breath, but the whisper held scorn. "Jill never sees Deborah now. 'I'm sure she doesn't care for her any more!'"

It was Paul's turn to feel astonished at his sister's superior knowledge on the subject of this quondam friendship. It reminded him of Gillian's sudden outburst of tears this evening when he had mentioned Miss Venning's name, of her cryptic utterance, "I shouldn't *dream* of taking Deborah Venning with me!" What had compassed the overthrow of Deborah from her once unassailable position as Mrs. Driscoll's greatest friend? What did Joan know?

"You mean you've applied for the post?" he said satirically, as if with deliberate intent to wound. It

would have been difficult to say whose nerves had been the more jarred during that day of public reckoning. "You've cut Deborah out—have you, Jo?" His eyes glinted sword-like. Joan's fell under the glance; she bit her lip as if she were trying to suppress those tears that had threatened all the evening. "But she won't take you, my dear!"

"She certainly will not!" Lady Pallant exercised her rare authority. Besides, the events of the day justified her. "Joan will not be allowed to travel under the care of any one whose name has been made unfortunately so public. A woman—however innocent—who has divorced her husband is not the proper chaperon for a young and sheltered girl. Joan has her home duties."

"You needn't be afraid, mother," said Paul, "Gillian wouldn't be bothered with her. She wishes for solitude. She's sick of humanity. She doesn't even want Joan—*chose extraordinaire*!"

Joan suppressed a sob; her throat felt dry. Even Paul's sarcasm was lost in the unwelcome news he had so carelessly conveyed. Gillian was going abroad; she might possibly keep her destination a secret. And she was a bad correspondent. Life looked blank for Joan; home duties offered but a dismal substitute for the beautiful presence thus abruptly and decisively withdrawn. . . .

"It is a thousand pities her aunts have absolutely no hold over her," said Lady Pallant, reflecting upon the undesirability of a young woman possessing sufficient money to gratify any imprudent whim that might suggest itself. "It is a wretched business," she added.

Dinner was at an end. Joan followed her mother out of the room, a demure crushed figure. The two hours in the drawing-room still lay before her, and until they were over she would not be free to seek

her own room and indulge in those long-repressed tears. Lady Pallant would not have permitted a premature withdrawal. She held that it was imprudent to relax a disciplinary hold in little things. Only illness absolved her daughter from a punctual appearance at all meals, and at stated hours in the drawing-room. And to-night there was less chance than ever of evading that unwritten law. Joan had committed a definite act of rebellion in accompanying Gillian, and for some days at least, until the impression had a little worn off, she knew that the bit would inevitably be tightened, and that it behoved her to be careful of her conduct in little things. She took some embroidery and began to sew, but her eyes were brimming over with tears. Why had Gillian made up her mind to go abroad? Why had she never told her of her intention? She had the feeling that Gillian was slipping away from her. . . . And Paul knew. She must have told Paul.

Paul did not join them. They heard, as they sat there, the front door slam, a signal that informed them he had gone out to his club. Devoutly Joan wished that she, too, had a club which could swallow her up nightly during that dreaded two hours between dinner and bedtime. She envied Paul his absolute liberty, his freedom from all petty tyrannies and restraints. Above all she longed to be free—free that she might go even now to Gillian. . . . The thought was such a daring one that it brought the colour to her cheeks. It was followed quickly by another. What if Paul had gone to see Gillian now—instead of seeking refuge in his club?

Lady Pallant's thoughts were also concentrated upon Mrs. Driscoll. She did not quite share her children's admiration for Gillian; she considered her careless and imprudent. Nor did she approve of her influence over Joan, although it could not be

clearly proved from what Paul had said that she had persuaded Joan to accompany her to the Law Courts. He had warmly contradicted the assertion, and Joan had reluctantly agreed. Her daughter's disobedience had owed nothing to Gillian. In future she herself must exercise more authority, Lady Pallant reflected as she glanced once at Joan's meek bent head. In Gillian's absence this would be easier. But she must see Gillian before she went. She must warn her of the difficulties, the temptations of her position. A young and pretty woman who had divorced her husband possessed a dangerous independence. She would meet with admiration and pity from men, with blame and often contempt from women. There were always people ready to blame a wife, however innocent, who had been compelled to divorce her husband, especially when the husband was such a brilliant and popular figure, the writer of such amazingly clever poetry and plays. Lady Pallant had never liked Aylmer, though she had felt flattered when he came to see her, and she was an admirer of his dramatic work. She was afraid that Gillian had not been quite the right wife for him. Authors were a race apart. She thought of Shelley, of Byron. . . . Genius did not always make for domestic happiness. A seeking for inspiration seemed to tempt persons thus endowed into fortuitous flirtation. "She's absolutely necessary to my work," Aylmer had informed her when he first came to discuss his engagement to Gillian. At the time Lady Pallant had regarded the utterance as a piece of monstrous egotism. Cynically she imagined that when Gillian failed him, the essential inspiration was sought elsewhere. She could not hold her entirely free from blame. Absorbed in her child, and then in the loss of that child, she had

doubtless proved increasingly unappreciative of his work. It never occurred to Lady Pallant that Deborah Venning had been to blame—Deborah, who was so little seen in London now, who lived in the country, devoting herself to her garden and her old invalid father. There had never been a word said against Deborah Venning. . . .

Lady Pallant ordered the car at a quarter past ten on the following morning, an unusually early hour for her to leave the house. She drove at once to Kensington, to catch Gillian before she went out, as she expressed it. She was so successful that Gillian had not even begun her toilette. She had, however, finished her breakfast, and was in bed, reading the newspapers, of which she had ordered about a dozen. In all the illustrated ones there were pictures of herself; old presentments raked up from that remote epoch four years ago, when her wedding had made a little sensation. The *Daily Kodak* alone showed her as she had been yesterday when she had lifted her veil to give evidence. Inset was a picture of Aylmer, arrestingly handsome.

If Lady Pallant felt at all shocked at the nature of Gillian's occupation she did not say so.

Propped up by downy pillows delicately embroidered and monogrammed, and wearing a white silk wrap elaborately trimmed with real lace and a boudoir cap to match, Mrs. Driscoll looked extremely young and pretty. She was feeling more cheerful to-day. Preparations for her journey were proceeding rapidly; the telephone at her elbow was in constant use, and these minor activities were driving from her mind the unpleasant happenings of yesterday. She had slept well, and a quiet night had given her fresh courage. She could look at the

world this morning and not hate it with such savage bitterness. And there was balm, too, in the remembrance of Paul's visit, Paul's words. . . .

"I'm awfully sorry not to be up, Cousin Janet," she said, putting up a white cheek to be kissed. "Just look at these. I feel like the prisoner in a murder case!" She indicated the confused heap of papers of which some of the sheets had slidden upon the floor.

Lady Pallant's mien was mysteriously funereal, as if she had come to offer sympathy for a recent bereavement.

"My dear! I lost no time! So shocking!—And after only four years!"

Gillian coloured. She would have preferred not to discuss the subject seriously at this early hour. But Lady Pallant's manner indicated that she considered Mrs. Driscoll's attitude deplorably frivolous.

"People seem to have lost all sense of the indissolubility of marriage—of the holiness of the tie!" she continued firmly. "The obligations, the duties, the responsibilities involved! One sees it over and over again. And there is such a disposition in these days to treat the culprits lightly—to receive them again!"

"Aylmer's books will have a larger sale than ever, and people will simply *flock* to see his plays," said Gillian bitterly.

Lady Pallant did not reply to this remark, though she thought it more than likely. She merely said: "Paul tells me you are thinking of going abroad."

"Yes, I'm going on Saturday if I can get ready," said Gillian. "I am giving up the flat. I shall be away a long time," she added.

"I hope," said Lady Pallant, "that you are not thinking of going alone."

"Yes, Cousin Janet. I'm going quite alone."

"But is that quite wise, my dear? A very young woman—and in your unhappily most unfortunate position!"

"I admit my youth and my unfortunate position, but I feel I really must think a little of my nerves. Cousin Janet—you've never been in the divorce court——"

"My dear—I trust not, indeed!" cried Lady Pallant, holding up restraining hands. "You shock me inexpressibly!"

"So you can't have any idea how dreadfully strenuous it is," pursued Gillian with imperturbable calmness. "I felt ten years older last night. My nerves——"

"Nerves!" said Lady Pallant. "Duty should come before nerves."

Gillian wondered if this solemn dictum held as much sense as sound.

"Italy will distract me," said Mrs. Driscoll. "I have never been there since I was married, and it was never any fun going about with my aunts. They were always so horribly shocked at what they called foreign ways. I'm sure I shall simply love it now—alone and free—like this!"

"Yes, but you can't stay in Italy for ever," said Lady Pallant, "four or five months perhaps—but even in June it is often unbearably hot. I hope you will come back in May!"

"I shan't make any plans," said Gillian, leaning lazily back on the pillows and looking at her cousin through her long veiling lashes. "It will be so delicious just wandering about and seeing all the charming places one knows so well from picture post-cards!"

"I dislike the thought of your staying about at hotels alone. You are so young and people are sure

to talk—and then this unfortunate business has been so very notorious—Aylmer being such a well-known man and all! My dear, I feel you will be the prey of all kinds of horrible unprincipled people—I can't bear to think of it."

"Oh, you musn't be anxious about me, Cousin Janet," said Gillian earnestly.

"Paul dislikes the idea almost as much as I do. He didn't say so in so many words, but I could tell from his manner when we were discussing it at dinner last night. And a mother always knows what is passing in the minds of her children!"

Gillian suppressed a smile.

"And poor Joan is simply miserable at the prospect of losing you!"

"Dear Joan . . ." murmured Gillian without enthusiasm.

"Of course I couldn't think of letting her go with you. That is one of the reasons why I came to see you to-day—to beg you not to suggest any such thing!"

"I should never have dreamed of suggesting it," said Gillian.

"I know you will forgive me if I seem unkind—but I have such imperative reasons for not wishing her to go," said Lady Pallant.

"But I wouldn't take Joan for the world!" said Gillian, opening her eyes very wide at this—to her—preposterous suggestion. "I mean—I *want* to be alone, . . . that's such an immense attraction. . . . I couldn't have a girl on my hands. It's such a— a responsibility," she added lamely.

"Quite so," said Lady Pallant; "I was sure you would understand. Joan is a very good girl, but she requires—like all young girls—vigilance and discipline. It would be too heavy a burden for your young shoulders!" Lady Pallant snatched with sus-

picious eagerness at this solution. "Joan's upset, of course—she is so fond of you."

"She musn't miss the season, though," said Gillian.

"I was wondering if you couldn't persuade Miss Venning to go with you," continued Lady Pallant unsuspiciously. "She is devoted to you, I am sure you have only to suggest it."

"Ask Deborah to leave her bulbs in February?" Gillian's voice was strained and almost hoarse with the effort she made to steady it, but Lady Pallant observed only the light gaiety of the words.

"A friend in need is so much more important than a bulb!" she pronounced after a moment's reflection.

"Ah, you don't know the gardening soul," said Gillian.

She lay back for a moment closing her eyes wearily. The little action was not lost on Lady Pallant, who regarded her compassionately. What a child she looked, when all was said and done—scarcely older than Joan. To have one's life wrecked at twenty-two years! What incredible cruelty! Impulsively, for she was not a demonstrative woman, she leaned forward and put her hand on Gillian's fragile one. It would be easier to talk to her, to sympathise, if only Gillian would show some little sign that she felt the seriousness of her position. Instead, she seemed to resent talking about it. She was actually looking forward to that free time in Italy with zest and eagerness. Lady Pallant had come to-day with the intention of having what her daughter would have called a "heart-to-heart" talk, but Gillian's attitude made such a thing inconceivable.

"I do hope it won't be rough on Saturday," said Gillian suddenly, opening her eyes; "do you think

this wind will have gone down by then? I have such a stupid, chattering horror of the Channel even when it is fairly smooth. Of course at this time of year one must expect storms."

Lady Pallant had no views as to the probable state of the Channel on Saturday; she wondered, indeed, that this unimportant side-issue could thus prospectively affect Gillian.

"I cannot say," she remarked; "you may of course have it very smooth. But after a storm there is so often a ground swell which is almost as disagreeable! I wish you were not going."

"Oh, but I'm longing to get away. I feel I shall so enjoy being an independent tourist—not even a personally conducted one!"

"Paul," said Lady Pallant, reverting to her former objection, "is quite extraordinarily upset at the idea!" She paused for a moment. "I wish Paul would marry. He is growing so irritable. The way he caught Joan up at dinner last night was quite painful. They used always to be so devoted to each other. I hoped at one time that he would take a fancy to Lady Ferner's younger daughter—the pretty fair one who is a friend of Joan's, too. I asked her to dine constantly when he was with us for his long leave, but he never took the slightest notice of her. I should like them both to marry, of course, but it's different for a girl. However, if a young good-looking man doesn't marry when he has plenty of means it is his own fault, isn't it?"

"I suppose it is," said Gillian nervously. She was not quite sure if this speech were intended as a deliberate warning, a cry of "Hands off!" addressed to herself.

"I should welcome any girl of suitable age and birth," continued Lady Pallant, "no matter what her fortune was. I should be the last person to put

any obstacles in his way. But Paul seems quite blind where girls are concerned—sometimes I think he almost dislikes them. That's the worst of the Army—if a man really cares about his career it seems to swallow up all his time, giving him leisure for no other interests."

Gillian felt somewhat relieved at this proof of Lady Pallant's ignorance both as to the nature of her son's interests and the state of his heart.

While she murmured a half-audible reply, Lady Pallant, laying her hand again on Gillian's, said abruptly:

"My dear child, I cannot go away without telling you how very sorry I am for you. So very, very sorry! . . ."

There was a hint of softening in her large, well-moulded features and fine dark eyes.

"Oh, that's all right, Cousin Janet," said Gillian flushing. "I mean . . . I'm sure you are."

"Such a terribly difficult position for you, and at your age, too. So many girls of your age are still living in the shelter of their own homes. And it's not as if you were a widow, my dear, and could hope in course of time to make a second marriage." She paused now, regarding Gillian as if to watch the effect of these words.

Mrs. Driscoll began anew to wonder if Lady Pallant were in such complete ignorance as she had supposed on the subject of Paul.

"A second marriage, dear Cousin Janet? What a simply horrible idea!" She tried to laugh, but the sound was strangled in her throat.

Lady Pallant breathed a faint sigh of relief.

"Ah, I hoped you would agree with me there. Our dear vicar, Mr. Reynolds, is entirely opposed to divorced persons re-marrying, even the one known as the innocent party. We were having a

long talk about you, my dear, only two days ago."

"Dear Cousin Janet—I do wish you wouldn't discuss me even with a clergyman!"

"I always go to him for advice and counsel," said Lady Pallant, drawing herself up with a slight stiffening of the spine. "I find him particularly helpful, and I wish Paul and Joan did not dislike him so much, for it is so often on their account that I am obliged to consult him. I assure you, that to be the mother of a grown-up son and daughter in these days of relaxed parental discipline is an agonising responsibility; one feels in a perpetual state of apprehension. Paul is quite out of my control—I suppose that is only natural when a man has his income in his own hands. Joan—I have been a little anxious about Joan of late. For instance," her voice dropped sympathetically, "she insisted upon accompanying you to the Law Courts yesterday. Very sweet and dear of her and all that, but I do feel that she oughtn't to have gone against my definitely expressed wishes. I was very vexed with her. I feel very strongly that a young girl should not be seen in such places. It is so . . . so soiling. Joan does not often disobey me."

Gillian's mouth opened convulsively as if she were trying to repress a smile. Then she said:

"Oh, I'm dreadfully sorry she disobeyed you. I didn't want her to come at all—I felt you would disapprove. It was quite her own idea. I wasn't in the mood for any company."

"That was just what Paul seemed to think, and he as good as told Joan so last night." It did occur to her then to wonder how Paul had come to acquire such an accurate knowledge of Gillian's mood upon that famous occasion. "He almost inferred that she had been very tactless to inflict herself upon you at all. But Paul was in a very odd mood last night

—something seemed to have upset him completely. I do so dislike that bickering at meals. When they were children I never permitted it!"

Gillian offered no solution as to the reason of Paul's ill-temper. She had a feeling that she must keep his secret, especially as she was now convinced that his mother's suspicions were aroused, and that she was trying to approach the matter by side-roads and perhaps surprise Gillian into a confession or at least a denial.

Mrs. Driscoll gave a little wriggle of impatience; she was annoyed to find herself, thanks to the Pallant family, unwittingly involved in fresh complications. She longed to abuse Paul and Joan openly to their mother for their undesired friendship and devotion; she wanted to say that it was none of her seeking. . . .

"Well, my dear, I've been worrying you about my own affairs, and I really came to talk about yours!" Lady Pallant said this quite brightly, and with apparently no ulterior signification of interests running parallel and mutually involved. "And I really must be going. It is the day I have my hands manicured. Come and dine with us to-morrow, won't you? Quite *en famille* of course. I am sure you won't want to meet people just now!"

"Oh, thank you, Cousin Janet, but I don't really feel like going anywhere."

The thought of meeting Paul with this secret between them alarmed her.

"Joan will never forgive me if I fail to persuade you. Really—just this once. A kind of farewell——"

Gillian reluctantly agreed. She hoped that Paul might have an engagement; he did not often dine at home.

"I'm afraid we shan't have Paul—he talked of

going to see this new dancer with Captain Grant. Do you know, Gillian, I sometimes fancy that Captain Grant is taken with Joan?"

"What an excellent idea!" responded Gillian heartily.

She felt intensely relieved at the probable absence of Paul. She could almost look forward to a dull evening spent alone with Lady Pallant and Joan.

"I can leave early," she thought to herself.

CHAPTER IV

LADY PALLANT was sitting alone in the drawing-room a few minutes before eight on the following evening. The room was spacious, and on its pale walls there hung some fine pictures and etchings. Blue was the predominant colour in the carpet and hangings and in a beautiful old screen.

Lady Pallant sat very upright in a high chair, for she belonged to a generation to whom lolling had been forbidden, and she reaped the benefit of this education, for her back was as straight as ever, and the carriage of her head almost imperial. Her black satin dress fitted tightly, and she wore a lovely string of pearls round her still white and plump throat. She was idly turning the pages of *Punch* when the door opened and her son came into the room.

The black and white effect produced always by his smooth jet-black hair and white face was enhanced by the conventional evening dress which was peculiarly becoming to him. His slight, spare figure under middle height was boyish-looking, but there was no trace of the boy in his grave, rigid face, with the smouldering passionate eyes, the compressed firm mouth. Lady Pallant's one regret was that she had not bestowed upon her son her own inches. He was small for a man, being slightly shorter than his sister, which was an eternal grief to him.

"Oh, I thought you were dining out to-night with Captain Grant, Paul," she said, a little disturbed by his unexpected appearance.

"No, mother," he answered shortly.

"I heard you talking about going to see this

new dancer with the unpronounceable name," she said.

He frowned slightly. "As you know, I'm not very keen about seeing new dancers."

She paused, and laid *Punch* down on a table beside her.

"I'm expecting Gillian to dinner. Did Joan tell you?"

"She said something about it," said Paul carelessly.

He walked across the room and stood with his back to the fire, his face turned from the electric light that burned carefully shaded in some old gilt sconces.

"I told Gillian we should be quite *dans l'intimité*," she said.

He did not reply. His eyes wandered restlessly round the room. Within him there was a great tumult. Since he had visited her at her flat on the evening of the divorce he had not seen Mrs. Driscoll. It would be safe to say that she had scarcely been out of his thoughts. His love for her during these last days had become almost overwhelming in its fierce intensity. And with its growth the fear that she did not love—could never love him—had increased in proportionate intensity.

Lady Pallant was just beginning to wonder why he was so unusually silent and glum when the door opened and Joan came into the room. She wore a loose, flowing tea-gown, shell-pink in colour. It was picturesque and becoming, but decidedly *outré*. Her mother glanced at it with visible disapproval.

"My dear Joan, where on earth did you get that garment? You know how much I dislike those floppy things. You look like a sack."

"Anyhow, I'm a slim sack," said Joan, looking down at her own slightness. She thought the full,

soft thing hung gracefully about her tall, slim person. Besides, had she not copied it from a French model belonging to Gillian? She wore at her breast a great piece of green jade set in silver.

"I shall certainly speak to Madame Marthe about your clothes. I won't have you wear these extraordinary things!"

Joan bit her lip, but continued to look at herself approvingly in the glass. She wondered if she were nearly as pretty as Gillian. Captain Grant had told her that they could not be compared, but of course he was prejudiced in her favour, and she did not in the least believe this tribute to her own charms. His admiration—the first she had enjoyed—was giving her a new conceit in her personal appearance. She had thought lately a great deal about her clothes and the most becoming way of dressing her hair; she had even practised charming languorous attitudes in front of the long pier-glass in her bedroom!

"Do not let us be found squabbling when Gillian comes!" said Paul hastily, and with some show of irritability.

Gillian's arrival put a stop to any further polemic. As she came in she seemed to bring with her an atmosphere of fresh fragrance, born of the soft winter night which in its humidity seemed already to hint of opening buds and early flowers. Paul thought she looked beautiful in a soft dress of iron-grey chiffon that seemed to envelop her like a rain-cloud, and whose hue matched her eyes. Joan immediately flung her arms round her, crying:

"Darling Jill! How awfully sweet of you to come!"

Paul flashed a look of half-jealous disdain at his sister.

"For goodness' sake, Joan, don't throttle Gil-

lian!" he said, with exasperation in his voice. "You're behaving like a boisterous school-girl!"

Joan hung back, flushed, almost tearful, ashamed of her own impetuous boldness. Her lips trembled. To be snubbed in front of Gillian gave her sharp pain.

"Don't listen to him, Joan," said Gillian kindly. She laid her hand almost tenderly upon the girl's shoulder. She could hurt people herself with sharp gibe if necessary, but she did not like to see other people doing the hurting. Joan's misty blue eyes expressed oceans of adoring gratitude.

"He looks a horrid cross boy to-night," added Gillian.

Paul laughed; his good-humour was restored. "When I was trying to save you, too," he said. Her tranquil sweetness soothed his jarred overwrought nerves. He would have given worlds and worlds to put his arms round her as Joan had done, only much more gently, with indeed an infinite tenderness—and lay his lips to hers. The thought was so strong in his mind that he wondered if in some strange unexplained manner it could have communicated itself to her in all its mad longing.

They went down to dinner. The table, small and square, looked like a little white oasis in the middle of that great room with its fine dark panelling. It was set with four places, and it looked both intimate and sociable. Lady Pallant disliked shouting to people across yards of mahogany. And with four people, too, the conversation must necessarily be general.

Paul sat opposite to his mother; Gillian and Joan faced each other. The meal proceeded smoothly. Lady Pallant knew all about her food, for her late husband had been a celebrated gourmet, and her schooling in this department had been rigorous and

severe. She hoped sometimes that Paul dined at home more often in consequence. Joan was her despair. She would only eat diminishing unwholesome things; she had the very young girl's ambition to be extraordinarily slight, and was immensely proud of her sylph-like proportions, revealed rather than concealed by the condemned tea-gown.

To-night Lady Pallant was not thinking of her daughter. Joan might eat or leave as she chose. Her thoughts were concentrated upon Paul; she was watching him covertly. But his face wore no sign of emotion or interest. He talked away to Gillian, snubbed his sister occasionally with a derisive comment that brought the quick flush to her cheek, and ate his dinner as usual. She must have been mistaken as to the cause of his recent ill-humour. It could have nothing to do with Mrs. Driscoll. There was nothing in his manner, cool and imperturbable, to suggest that he was even slightly interested in Gillian. Her anxiety was lulled to rest. She even forgot how disconcerted she had felt at his sudden appearance just before dinner; she had certainly heard him announce his intention of dining with Captain Grant. Perhaps the plan had fallen through. It was absurd to conjecture from such slender premises that he had deliberately renounced a former engagement in order that he might see his cousin.

Once during the meal when he administered a delicate snub to Joan, Gillian said, smiling:

"How you do bicker—you two!" Her look of sympathy was not lost upon poor Joan, who glanced at her gratefully.

"It's only lately," she explained, "that Paul's taken to being so horrid to me!"

"It's only lately," mocked Paul, "that you've taken to being so uppish and behaving in this inde-

pendent way, just as if you were your own mistress. Grant," his eyes shone, "will knock all that nonsense out of you!"

"Now—Paul," implored Gillian.

Joan had never confided in her about Captain Grant, and the mention of his name brought a scarlet flush to her face. It was cruel of Paul to allude to him, just as if he were Joan's accepted lover, as if she had decided to give him the right to "knock any nonsense out of her" in the future.

But Gillian divined Paul's motive. It lay deep-rooted in a subtle, unacknowledged jealousy, fanned to-night perhaps by her own obvious partisanship of Joan. She felt at the moment as if she would be inordinately thankful when the seas divided her from the Pallant family. He was still jealous because Joan had accompanied her to the Law Courts, had occupied that position by her side which he had so passionately desired for himself. Gillian was the only person present who understood the working of his mind, and the knowledge irritated her. What right had he to be jealous of his sister, or of any one else for whom she showed preference? How had he dared, when all was said and done, to come the other evening and speak to her of his love? She was present to-night just to show him how lightly, how carelessly, she estimated that love.

"They're always quarrelling," said Lady Pallant. "I'm only sorry they are both too old to be sent out of the room when they begin!"

She glanced severely at Joan. Joan could be very irritating.

"We are all on edge to-night," thought Gillian. She wished there had been other people present—people who did not belong to the family, and who would exercise a restraining influence. To dine *dans l'intimité* with one's own relations was never an un-

mixed joy; to-night with all these cross-currents it was a more than usually strenuous experience.

"I've taken my ticket," she said suddenly. "I am to start at eleven on Monday and go to Paris for a few weeks. Then on by the Simplon into Italy." Her eyes were dreamy; it was as if she saw herself travelling swiftly into the radiant blue and gold of an Italian spring. "I shall get everything I want in Paris."

Both Joan and Paul were silent. The girl's face was consciously sad; the man's obstinately grim. Lady Pallant was beginning to think it wasn't such a bad idea of Gillian's to go away—right away for a time. Joan was showing a distinct disposition to imitate her, to emulate that freedom and independence; it was bad for her to witness a woman so little her senior enjoying such a measure of liberty. "Jill does it—why shouldn't I?" Lady Pallant had heard that remark once or twice lately on her daughter's lips, and Mrs. Driscoll's absence would at any rate silence such a protest. And Paul? . . . Ah, that was where her real anxiety lay. But if he really had any fleeting fancy for Gillian, born of his chivalrous pity and compassion for her "life awry," there was no remedy like the severe one of separation. A wholesome and drastic remedy like the lopping off of a limb to save the whole body. Lady Pallant belonged to the stern old school of heroic treatment; she was always impatient of modern palliatives and soppy compromise. She was all for cutting off the offending hand, for sharp removal of the mote. She was beginning to regard Gillian's project in a new and approving light.

For there was danger in Gillian, for all that soft quietness, that inherent gentleness of hers. Lady Pallant recalled Aylmer Driscoll's brief courtship—a thing of flame, sweeping all obstacles aside, en-

gulfing Gillian in the vortex of its passion. And now more lovely than ever she claimed, inarticulately it is true, but none the less surely, compassion from the sterner sex. They would see in her the woman whom a "swine," to use Paul's own expression, had treated ignobly. Aylmer was by no means popular with men; he had the latent touch of effeminacy which so often imbues the poet and writer unless he belongs to the robust school. His conquests had always been in feminine fields. Recognising these facts with her astute if narrow vision, Lady Pallant decided that Gillian's absence from England would be, under the circumstances, providential. Of course there would be a certain amount to put up with from Joan, who would be miserable at losing her friend. But Joan must be sacrificed on the altar of Paul's welfare. Mr. Reynolds had warmly acquiesced in her view of the situation; had foreseen, too, the peril in the person of this young and beautiful cousin whose intimate friendship with Joan undoubtedly constituted a sure and dangerous link with Joan's brother. . . .

In the drawing-room conversation was desultory. Lady Pallant fingered the pieces of a jig-saw puzzle. Joan occasionally went over to the table and fitted in a piece with a triumphant air of realised inspiration. Gillian and Paul sat on two armchairs at the end of the room away from the fire, and under cover of Joan's spasmodic playing (for she was restless to-night, and hovered between her mother's puzzle and the piano) they discoursed together in low tones.

"So you're really going," he said. There was no sentimentality in his tone, only a kind of disdainful reproach. "Any idea how long you'll be away?"

"I thought—perhaps—six months," she said. "One never knows. Business—or the aunts—might bring me back."

"Less than that," he suggested, "ought to satisfy Mrs. Grundy."

"You know I don't care about Mrs. Grundy."

"Then why go at all?"

"I'm going to please myself. I want change. I feel shut up in London. Oh, I want to *taste* my freedom—to feel its wings!"

"And you can't do that in London?" His eyes, narrowing, were fixed upon her face.

"I feel like a prisoner here. I've done nothing—and I won't be punished."

"Who wants to punish you?"

"All the people," said Gillian, "who pity me, and give me advice. I sometimes think that women, however much they may pretend to pity me, are looking at me with scorn, and saying to themselves, 'What a fool she must be—she couldn't even keep her husband!' They forget that there aren't many husbands like Aylmer." She paused with shining eyes. "He makes me think of Shelley. I had ceased to stimulate, ceased to inspire him. It's just a case of Harriet and Mary over again. I was always dreadfully sorry for Harriet."

"One would not," said Paul bitterly, "take Shelley for an example of domestic respectability. But Aylmer has not Shelley's excuse. He has never been, and he will never be, a great poet. To my mind he is on the contrary a very mediocre and inferior one. I have yawned my way through most of his plays. I dislike his verses intensely. I disliked the Gillian series of sonnets most of all!"

It seemed almost incredible even to himself that he should at last be able to express openly and fear-

lessly his opinion of Aylmer Driscoll to Aylmer's wife. Yet even now he was amazed at his own hardihood.

"He would have been far greater if he hadn't always been spoiled by the critics," she said softly. "I can always see what's good in his art. I don't say that he's like Shelley in point of genius, only that he reminds me of him sometimes. He wasn't generous like Shelley. He couldn't have written the *Adonais* about a brother poet. But some of his work—not a great deal perhaps—is really fine. I didn't like the Gillian series myself."

While she sat there discussing Aylmer coldly and dispassionately with Paul, she felt as though she were calmly dissecting an intimate stranger, a man whom she had once known, and from whom she had long been separated. It was so difficult to identify the Aylmer of four years ago with the Aylmer of to-day. The past controlled the present to a certain extent, but it could not cloud her judgment. Except during the first glamour of love she had always been able to criticise his work. She had been ready with due meed of praise, but she had been ruthless too. She remembered the day when he had first cavilled at her criticism; that had always seemed to her the beginning of the end, it had destroyed the perfect frankness that had existed between them.

Already her wound was old. If the divorce proceedings had punctured it to fresh hemorrhage it was still very nearly healed. A year ago she had suffered and wept; had felt with every nerve in her body the dreadful humiliation of Aylmer's desertion. Love does not die very easily even when pride assists at the slaying. Hers had died slowly, painfully, step by step; she had watched it as a stoical sufferer will observe an open wound. . . .

Now already she could speak of Aylmer the poet in this cold, impartial, dispassionate way; she could criticise justly and generously, yet not without the old frank ruthlessness.

"You must write to me, you know," Paul said in a low tone under cover of the majestic first chords of the Pathetic Symphony.

"I . . . I don't think so," said Gillian, suddenly confused.

His face hardened.

"Don't be too cruel to me, Gillian," he said. "I know when we are hurt ourselves we want to retaliate, and our victim is generally some one who has committed the fatal mistake of caring for us. Don't, please, make me your victim!"

"I don't see that my writing to you would serve any useful purpose, Paul," she answered.

"It would only be very kind, very humane. And when you send for me I shall come."

"But I shall certainly never send for you!" She looked at him in surprise at this immensely audacious suggestion.

"Not even," he said, "when the decree is made absolute?"

"Not even then."

"You will never let me repeat what I said to you the night before last?"

"Paul, what's the use of talking like this? You know it is utterly impossible!"

He jerked back his head—a trick he had when he was at all perturbed—and looked her steadily in the eyes.

"Dear heart—how I love you!" he said, smiling, yet there was a bitter note of self-derision in his tone.

The look, the words, touched her in spite of her-

self. Almost they thrilled her. Something in her heart, something that was desolate, lonely and wounded, responded involuntarily to Paul. She felt pride in his love—that tortured hurt thing laid maimed at her feet. His strange eyes, dark with mystery, were fixed upon her with frank adoration. Her own softened as they met them. His words echoed in her ears, "*Dear heart—how I love you . . .*" Joan's whirling notes seemed to catch them up and repeat them in the frantic passion of the quick movement. And, after all, were they not pretty words? Love, whatever its guise, was almost always a beautiful thing of gracious words and phrases. . . .

She was silent. If he perceived the growing softness of her eyes and mouth he was too wise to follow up his brief triumph. She rose from her seat wearily; her slight, lissom figure looked delicate and fragile.

"I must really be going, Cousin Janet."

Lady Pallant rose and surveyed for a second the almost completed puzzle. Joan's music stopped abruptly on a crashing chord that held no little exasperation. Paul had simply monopolised Jill the whole evening. . . .

"Don't overdo it, Gillian," said Lady Pallant kissing her, "you are looking very tired."

She said languidly, "I shall rest in Italy—in the sunshine. I'm anæmic—the sun is the best cure for that in the world!"

Lady Pallant said: "The winds are treacherous there in the spring. I had pneumonia in Florence once."

"Oh, I shall be very careful. I'm very attentive to Brother Body!" Her tone was light. She kissed her cousin on both cheeks and then turned to Joan, who was looking plaintive and reproachful.

"Good-night, dear little Joan. Come round and see me at tea-time to-morrow—a farewell visit. You'll find me dusty and grubby with packing!"

Joan clasped her round the neck, regardless of Paul's former speech. "Good-night, darling, darling Jill!"

Paul accompanied her downstairs.

"How are you going?"

"I must have a taxi, please."

In a few minutes a taxi was throbbing before the door. Outside in the square the immense plane trees were swaying against the night sky, tossing their heads like plumes in the hurrying wind. It was fine, and a few stars were visible. There was a sense of spring in the rush of cold, exhilarating air that met them as they stood upon the doorstep.

Paul followed Gillian across the strip of pavement. For a moment the light from the street lamp illuminated her face. It was white and troubled under the uncovered masses of her dark hair. She looked like a queen, proud though dethroned; a queen in exile. . . . Paul's hand was on the door of the cab.

"I must see you home," he said. Before she could remonstrate he had got in and was sitting beside her. The taxi glided forward.

Joan, drawing aside the blind in the drawing-room and looking from the window, said jealously:

"Paul's gone in the taxi with Gillian. How selfish it was to keep her all to himself this evening. He talked to her all the time—I never had a word with her!"

She gave a little dry sob. Lady Pallant looked at her austere.

"You'd better go up to bed, Joan, my dear," she said quite good-humouredly. "And don't talk non-

sense about Paul. It's always silly to be jealous."

She kissed her daughter's forehead. Joan felt herself dismissed and snubbed, and withdrew sulkily triumphant that she had, at any rate, "given Paul away" to her mother. Was Paul really in love with Gillian? Did he mean to marry her when the divorce was perfectly accomplished? They seemed to have progressed enormously in intimacy since the last time Joan had seen them together. Did Paul know all the details of those of her nebulous plans that Gillian was forming for the future? He might follow her to Italy. . . . It hurt her to think that Gillian had never disclosed to her that growing friendship with Paul. She felt in a sense shut out by these two people who were both so dear to her. . . .

CHAPTER V

IN the cab Paul sat silent, not raising his eyes. They had turned up into Knightsbridge and a little crush delayed them at the corner of Sloane Street. The lights of a giant hotel gleamed vividly. Knots of people awaiting the approaching string of omnibuses stood on the pavement. There was stir, colour, movement, excitement in the nocturnal scene. Once free of the block they slipped swiftly forward into the comparative quiet of the long road that dips to Kensington. The trees in the Park waved their leafless branches; their dark trunks looked like serried ranks of sentinels. Couples loitered on the pathway, their arms encircled. Great motor omnibuses laden with human freight ground their way east and west. . . . And Paul turned suddenly to Gillian as if realising for the first time that they were alone together in this great, wonderful, confused world of London.

"Oh, my darling, I love you," he said. He put his arms round her and drew her to him. Their lips met. He remembered afterwards that he had not been surprised at her sudden surrender. To-night she was changed and softened; she was beginning to envisage what his love might mean for her in the future. To-night he could almost make himself believe that she loved him.

"And you? And you?" he said. But again his lips were on hers so that she could not answer.

"Oh, Paul—it is all so wrong, as I told you before. I'm still Aylmer's wife. I'm not going to marry you. I know I have been weak in letting you speak to me in this way—in letting you kiss me. . . ." She hesitated, withdrawing now from

his touch. He could scarcely see her white averted face.

"But if you love me——" he said, bewildered.

Surely that change in her could signify nothing but that she was beginning to love him.

"Why, you'll be as free as Joan in six months' time, my dear. What's going to prevent our marrying?"

"I tell you I don't feel free!" Her face wore a puzzled look that gave it for the moment an almost childish aspect of helpless inconsequence. It was that of a child brought face to face with a problem whose solution was beyond its capacity. "Some people think it wrong—your mother does, for instance—for a woman who has divorced her husband to remarry."

"My mother thinks it wrong?" he repeated incredulously.

Many times lately he had seriously considered the question of confiding his secret to his mother. She had always wished him to marry young; she had sometimes openly deplored his delay in choosing a wife among the hundreds of charming and suitable girls. That she could disapprove of Gillian as a future daughter-in-law provided a fresh dilemma in a situation that was, to say the least of it, sufficiently tangled. Oh, why wasn't Gillian a young girl, free to love him without question, free to listen to his love? He caught her hands passionately.

"Oh, my dear—my dear," he said; "don't listen to all these people. We've our own consciences—our own standards—haven't we? If it doesn't seem wrong to us we cannot hurt our own honour!"

"But I'm not sure, you see. I don't know what to think. I can't say whether it's wrong or right. . . ."

He put his arms about her again. The comfort

of his touch militated powerfully against the growing desolation of her loneliness. Could it be possible that she had fallen in love with him? His ardent love and devotion had undoubtedly evoked response within her. She permitted again his caress, his kiss, wondering at herself through all her growing conviction that she did love him, did wish in the far future to marry him.

"I love you," he murmured, "I love you." His hands strayed over her hair. "How beautiful you are, dear Jill. . . ." There was worship in his tone. "Nothing else matters if we love each other. You must write to me, darling."

The taxi stopped abruptly before the great new block of red-brick flats built in careful Georgian pattern. He sprang out and helped Gillian to alight.

"Don't come in, Paul," she said.

"I must see you again. When?" he said.

"I'm not sure. I'll write."

He stopped in front of her, unwilling to let her go.

"Do you think Joan guesses anything?" he said.

"I can't tell. Sometimes I think she does. She's jealous, you know. But she hasn't said anything."

"Yes," he said; "she seems jealous and suspicious. I don't understand her. She's been awfully queer lately."

"She's a good little soul," said Gillian, "be kind to her, Paul."

She touched his hand and moved away towards the lift. She did not look back, though she felt that his eyes were watching her.

Gillian let herself in with the latch-key. She went straight into her bedroom and switched on the electric light. Then she examined her face

scrutinisingly in the mirror. It looked white and troubled in its dark setting of hair. She was still trembling a little with an emotion she had not as yet attempted to analyse. The warmth and ardour of Paul's love had touched her. She felt no longer so cold, so desolate. But it had evoked reminiscences and challenged comparisons. It seemed only the other day that Aylmer had come to her with words of love—the first she had ever heard. She had thought and believed that first love would be immortal, that nothing but death could separate herself and Aylmer. . . . Now their love lay dead between them. She was almost glad that it had died, as it were, abruptly. No slow drifting apart, no daily diminishing. It had been just that—the seeking and finding of a fresh inspiration. The egotism of genius had demanded this faithlessness.

Her maid knocked and came into the room.

"I didn't hear you come in, ma'am. Miss Venning is waiting to see you in the drawing-room."

"Miss Venning?" said Gillian, bewildered. "Oh, tell her I'll come in a moment."

She scarcely knew what she said.

The woman withdrew noiselessly. Gillian sat down by her dressing-table almost stunned by the suddenness of the announcement. Why had Deborah come? Why must she face the double torture of seeing this woman who had once been her friend? She leaned her arms on the table and hid her face in her hands. Her heart beat violently, the trembling of her limbs increased. At last she rose, and with a cold, controlled face she walked down the narrow passage into the drawing-room with head erect and eyes shining dangerously.

Deborah, who was sitting listlessly by a fire that was almost out, rose and came quickly towards her.

She was going to kiss her, but Gillian stood stock still at her approach and did not even hold out her hand. Their eyes met. . . .

Deborah was not in evening dress. She wore a coat and skirt of dark seal-coloured velvet, and a large hat to match that shaded her face. Her throat was bare and looked very white against her dark furs. Her vivid golden-red hair shone strangely; her cheeks were flushed. She looked to Gillian immensely changed, and in the change there was a subtle note of demoralisation to which few women could have been blind. The slightly exaggerated fashion of her clothes seemed to overpass the legitimate limit of "smartness"; she was not dressed as a lady should be. Gillian recoiled from her.

"Why have you come?" she said in her cold even way. "If you had written first, instead of taking me by storm, I should have told you quite frankly that it was impossible for me to receive you."

Deborah drew back a step. She had not expected a definite declaration of war. What did Gillian know? Aylmer had always assured her of his wife's complete and unsuspecting ignorance.

"Why—what do you mean? I've always come to see you whenever I liked, Jill," she began protestingly.

Gillian's eyes swept her face with a remorseless scrutiny.

"Have you?" she said. "Perhaps times have changed. At any rate for the future I should like you to understand quite clearly that I can't and won't receive you. I don't wish to see you. I am sure you will know why without my having to tell you!"

It seemed to her that something of Deborah's magnificent vitality left her at these words. She

looked suddenly drooping. Her lips parted, but she uttered no word.

Gillian was silent, too. She had no intention of helping her out of a situation she had brought voluntarily upon herself.

"But, Jill . . ." she said at last; "but, Jill . . . I don't understand!"

"But I do!" Gillian's voice rang out inexorably. "Your name was not mentioned, and you have me to thank for that! I can't think why I was so stupid and weak as to keep it out of the proceedings. But because I am stupid and weak I didn't mean you were to dare to come here and encroach upon my privacy!"

"Oh, but you are making a mistake, Jill . . . a frightful, hideous mistake!"

"Don't please tell me any lies, Deborah. It isn't worth while. I really know everything." She moved towards the bell significantly, and was about to put her finger upon it when Deborah ran forward to stop her.

"Oh, Jill—one moment! What—what are you going to do?"

"Do? Why nothing at all," said Gillian. "What are you afraid of?"

She gazed at Deborah with scorn. The girl looked very white, and her mouth was trembling piteously. Her mouth was her ugliest feature, it was large and weak. But the upper part of her face was beautiful, even the eyes of greenish hazel, clear as a summer pond.

"How did you know?" she gasped at last.

"You must be satisfied with knowing that I do know. Will you please go away now, Deborah? I am going to ring the bell. I've done a great deal for you, but I really can't see you and talk to you—you mustn't expect it."

"You knew all the time?" The words were laboured, as if dragged from her against her will.

"Almost—all the time."

Deborah suddenly fell on her knees, sobbing at Gillian's feet.

"Don't make a scene, please," said Gillian harshly. "Do get up and go away."

"Oh, Jill—Jill—you're an angel. It would have simply killed dad if he'd known anything!"

"What a pity you ran the risk, then, of killing him," said Gillian. Her light ironic tone flicked like a whip. She regarded the kneeling figure with amused scorn.

"Forgive me—forgive me, Jill."

"Why should I forgive you? You knew what you were doing! You've ruined my life and my home. You've been a low-down thief. I despise you. It's no good your coming and whining to me, now—whimpering over a thing you did deliberately—only afraid of being found out! You had better get up, for I am going to ring the bell!"

Deborah rose to her feet. Her face was slightly reddened with crying; her hat was a little awry, it intensified and accentuated that indescribable look of demoralisation which Gillian had noticed in her appearance to-night.

Gillian held the door open and she had no choice but to say good-bye and go quietly away, for the maid was already at the front door waiting to show her out.

"She knows what she wanted to know—what she came here to find out," said Gillian to herself.

She had hated the degrading little scene. To utter hideous truths seemed always a soiling thing to do, no matter how necessary it might be. She had hated this meeting with Deborah, so superfluous, so unnecessary. She had never desired the consola-

tion of an opportunity to tell her dispossessor what she thought of her. . . .

"Deborah asked for it," she said, excusing herself.

What an evening of turmoil—of dramatic happenings, unsought, undesired. First Paul—then Deborah. Her unquiet brain meditated first upon one, then upon the other; filling her thoughts with painful confusion. How glad she would be to go away—away from it all. She longed to cut the ties that bound her to England, to make a fresh start, to hide herself as it were. What would Deborah tell Aylmer? Would she confess that episode of her nocturnal visit, and its results so ignominious to herself? She strongly felt that Deborah would keep the matter to herself. She had not been spared. She had come to have her fears allayed, as a murderer will seek his victim's grave to assure himself that it has not been disturbed, that nothing has been investigated nor discovered. She had come perhaps to look upon her hapless dupe. She was the older of the two; at school she had always had the stronger character, she had led Gillian. . . .

Gillian sat immersed in these painful and bitter thoughts. The fire had gone out, but she did not feel at all cold. She knew she would find one brightly blazing in her bedroom directly she went there. Even now the room seemed full of Deborah's presence; the scent of her clothes still drenched it. . . . Yes, there had been something repulsive about Deborah to-night. She was too vivid, and she had lost dignity and self-respect. When she had been kneeling there in utter abandonment and entreaty, Gillian had felt inclined to touch her with her foot as she might have touched and spurned some unclean reptile. She had resisted the impulse. Deborah was almost low enough in her own estima-

tion; she could only kneel and cry for mercy and silence. To sue favour of one whom one has injured irremediably is a depth to which few can descend without loss of caste.

How could Aylmer love this woman? How could she inspire him? He had perhaps seen in her only the innocent girl diligently tending at all seasons the flowers of her own growing. Deborah's garden was almost celebrated, and she had even published a little book about it, illustrated with photographs of her own taking. Over and over again during the first year of their married life Gillian and Aylmer had spent week-ends with the Vennings. Aylmer had once described the relations of Deborah and her old father—to whom she was indeed sincerely attached—as ideal. He had liked the quiet and repose of the old Surrey garden with its fresh perfume in hot June days of roses and stocks and syringa. Sometimes when Gillian had been prevented by illness or mourning from accompanying him, he had gone alone at her persuasion. After the baby's death, indeed, Gillian had welcomed it as a relaxation for him when she was in too deep grief to see any one. She had believed absolutely in Deborah's love for herself, in Deborah's unalterable loyalty and allegiance. The two in whom she had the most perfect confidence had betrayed her and she could scarcely tell which of the two disillusionments had been the more bitter.

The coming of Deborah had disturbed her tranquillity anew. She felt restless to-night; her brain was extraordinarily active. Perhaps, too, she reproached herself a little for having listened to Paul's renewed words of love, for having suffered his kisses, his touch. She did not quite know why she had yielded except that it had seemed in a sense to comfort her. She had felt grateful to him. If she

married him she knew that his love for her would never undergo any change; it was of the obstinate, persistent kind that nothing can destroy. He would always worship her, always kneel at her feet. His dark eyes followed her into her dreams that night, and in her dreams, too, she heard him repeat with a new and wonderful tenderness: "*One of these days, dear Jill—one of these days.*"

CHAPTER VI

AT four o'clock on the following day Joan Pallant appeared, a pleasing picture of youth and prettiness that never amounted to actual beauty, carefully and fashionably dressed in a dark blue coat and skirt with big white furs. She was triumphant, too, at the thought of having scored a victory over Paul, who had not been invited, but this brief triumph was quickly destroyed, for on entering Gillian's bright little room she discovered Miss Letitia Stanway—the younger of Mrs. Driscoll's two aunts—already ensconced there in the most comfortable armchair near the fire.

Miss Stanway was elderly but child-like. This was because she had always been treated by her elder sister as though she were still a foolish inclined-to-be-naughty child. Letitia had always been dominated by Martha, obeying her, deferring to her in all things. Miss Martha still rated her soundly on occasion, and almost always behaved tyrannically towards her, and Letitia adored her and looked up to her in all things.

As a child when still under their tutelage, Gillian had very much preferred her Aunt Letitia. This was principally because Aunt Matty had always undertaken the disagreeable side of her education. It was Aunt Matty who gave her her first lessons, who had been the one to take her to the dentist, and administer when necessary powders, rebukes, and even painful punishments. Her rule had been a very strict one, but on the whole it was fairly just, although Gillian soon became aware that it was more severe than that enjoyed by the majority of her own contemporaries.

While it had been Miss Martha's rôle to punish and reform, it had been Miss Letty's to comfort and assuage. This was done in no subversive sense, for Miss Martha permitted the chidden Gillian to seek the comfort of Miss Letty's sympathy. "Orphans require a certain indulgence," she was wont to say. "I am sure if our dear sister had lived she would have spoilt Gillian terribly—she was always much too soft."

Gillian had spent the first eighteen years of her life in the little grey severe-looking house in Brock Street, with only rare intervals of absence when she went to school or was taken to the seaside. She was, in many ways, extraordinarily ignorant and innocent when she went to spend that memorable first season with Lady Pallant—an epoch which had promptly ended with her marriage to Aylmer. But she had been very carefully educated. In Bath it would be a matter of some difficulty for a girl to escape education. Gillian went to the Technical School to learn cooking and dressmaking. She was drilled and taught to dance and swim; she was even forced to play games which she disliked and found fatiguing. Her clothes were strong and plain, but they could not hide the delicious grace of her slight figure. Bare throats and low-necked blouses were, it is needless to say, taboo in that demure household. The short and tight skirts of that era were never permitted to disfigure the slim form of Gillian. Her aunts spent a good deal on her clothes, and in spite of the severity of their tastes she contrived to look charming, if a little old-fashioned and ungirlish.

"The fashions are positively indecent," Miss Martha had observed, gazing at a picture of a narrow slit-up skirt worn by a young woman whose aspect suggested effrontery, "and I will never consent

to dear Gillian wearing melons in her ears like those Barracombe girls!"

Letitia had been weeping just before Joan's arrival over the defalcation of Aylmer Driscoll.

Seeing Gillian alone in her flat "brought it all home to her," she said. And who could believe that a man capable of writing such exquisite verses, full of edifying, uplifting thoughts, could be so wicked and unprincipled?

"We thought—Matty and I—that he was the one man worthy of our dear Gillian, and the one who could best understand and appreciate her. We always believed, my dear, that your life would be one long path of sunshine."

For in spite of a lifetime spent beneath the crushing common sense of Miss Matty, Letitia Stanway still remained incorrigibly sentimental. Had Miss Martha been present she would certainly have checked such an effusion with a severe, "Don't be a sentimental goose, Letty!" But for once Miss Letitia was in a position to speak freely out of the fulness of her heart, and if any transitory sense of gratitude for the cold in the head that had kept Martha in Bath that day had ever found inward expression in her heart she would have immediately suppressed it as unimaginably wicked.

Nor was she quite sure that her sister would have encouraged any discussion of such an unmentionable episode as a divorce case even with one of the leading characters. She belonged to a generation that was appalled and shocked by the frank discussion of realities.

"No one's life is ever a path of sunshine," said Gillian coolly, "even I didn't expect that, you know, Aunt Letty. But I did expect, like most girls, just

the ordinary commonplace normal happiness with all its ups and downs that marriage generally means when two people are really in love with each other. You mustn't fret over it, Aunt Letty. It's bad, I know, but it isn't as bad as it sounds. One can get used to almost anything, I believe."

"If we could only persuade you to return to our roof," said Miss Letitia, "it would be such a joy to have you, dear Gillian. Bath is always so charming at this time of year, and the quiet, regular, harmonious life would refresh and soothe you after all you have gone through. Martha begged me to add her entreaties to mine. She could not approve, she said, of any one so young and—and pretty as yourself, Gillian, going abroad alone."

"It's very kind of you, Aunt Letty. Later on—perhaps. Just now I don't want to go anywhere where I know people, or have friends. . . . I feel I can't display my unsucccess before the world."

Gillian leaned a little forward towards the fire, the light of which warmed the dull *vieux-rose charmeuse* dress she was wearing to a flame-like hue.

"Martha always felt," continued Letitia, "that if she could only have *seen* Aylmer and talked to him and remonstrated with him she might have influenced him for his good, and persuaded him to return to you. But he absolutely refused to see her or even to communicate with her except through his solicitor, who certainly wrote the most insulting letters. If you remember, Aylmer never seemed to care for Martha even at the beginning—I can't think why!"

Gillian suppressed a smile, covering her face, which was still averted, with her hand. How difficult it had been, even in the beginning, to induce Aylmer to journey down to Bath and stay in Brock Street. He declared that the large joints of beef and mutton, the boiled suet puddings, watery vege-

tables, and the cold food rigorously adhered to on Sundays, made him perfectly ill. He also passionately disapproved of Miss Stanway's firm attitude towards the dates upon which she considered that fires should be given up.

The smile hurt Gillian; it belonged to those days of perfect sympathy, of mutual laughter over Miss Martha's unbending discipline.

"Martha declares she will never open another book of Aylmer's; she has burnt all those she had," added Miss Letitia.

"You must tell her," said Gillian, looking up, "that she mustn't judge poets just like other people. They *are* different." She fell back on her old line of defence that had been so unsuccessful with Paul Pallant. "She must remember Shelley."

"Shelley?" Miss Letitia was now genuinely shocked. "Oh, my dear Gillian—such a wicked young man with all those Harriets and Marys and Janes. Pray do not mention Shelley! Martha and I have never read his poems except a few in the anthologies. So opposed to all law and order and discipline! Badly as Aylmer has behaved, he hardly deserves to be compared with Shelley. What does Janet Pallant say?" she continued. "I feel she must be dreadfully distressed, especially as you were married from her house. Dear Gillian," sentimentally and reminiscently, "I always said you were the handsomest couple I ever saw. Aylmer was really beautiful—for a man—and you, well, of course, we may have been partial, but I can remember Matty saying to me on the way home, 'We have every right to be proud of our dear little girl!'"

"Do have one of those cakes, Aunt Letty," said Gillian, desirous of stemming the flood of reminiscence.

"Oh my dear—you are feeding me far too well! And after all those rich, delicious things we had at

lunch I feel as if I had eaten far too much already. Only I was hungry after my long journey. Of course I know the trains are very quick, but two hours is quite a long time when one seldom goes beyond the Sydney Gardens or the Pump Room. We are getting so old and stay-at-home that I assure you we regard going to Lansdown or Sion Hill as quite an excursion!"

"I wish I could have seen Aunt Matty before I start," said Gillian, "but you must say good-bye to her for me and tell her I've quite made up my mind to go to Italy."

"I do wish you were not going there," said Miss Letitia, not unmindful of her sister's very trenchant and pronounced views on the subject. "We know such a sad thing that happened to a girl who went there about two years ago. She was invited to Rome to visit some friends and she was so delighted at the prospect—all her young companions envied her! I remember it caused quite a little stir. Her name was Elsie Smith—perhaps you remember her? Well, she became a Papist while she was in Rome, and nothing they could do or say could stop her or induce her to change when she came home again. And after a few months she went into a nunnery. Such a sad, sad thing! It has quite broken her mother's heart."

"I don't think you need be afraid," said Gillian dryly, "of my becoming a Papist."

The case of Elsie Smith, nevertheless, interested her. She remembered her—a weak, foolish-looking girl with no chin to speak of, and with a tyrannical widowed mother whom she could surely have never disobeyed before in her life. That she could have displayed such obstinate determination under any circumstances amazed Gillian. Still . . . a nunnery!

"I expect she became a nun to get away from Mrs. Smith," she observed, after a brief mental survey of the situation.

"Oh, I assure you her mother simply adored her!" said Miss Letitia in a shocked tone; "it is a lasting grief to her. I always advise young people now *not* to go to Rome, but if they persist in doing so, I say, *Remember Elsie Smith!*"

Gillian laughed.

"It's no laughing matter, my dear Gillian," said Miss Letitia nervously, wondering how Martha would have dealt with this apparent flippancy. "I consider it very wrong to *court* temptation. One never knows how one may be able to resist it. And Rome does put the Roman Catholic point of view very temptingly in front of people, I have always been told. There are so many surface attractions, and then their music is delightful. People are led on little by little, scarcely realising it. And the power of the priests is so great! One could see that poor little weak Elsie would have small chance against them!"

Gillian struck in to change the subject—she was beginning to get tired of Elsie Smith—"I'm expecting Joan Pallant this afternoon. You remember Joan, don't you, Aunt Letty? She was one of my bridesmaids."

"Oh yes, indeed, I remember her quite well. I remember, too, that Matty thought the way she did her hair was not quite *comme il faut*. And her dress—for a young girl—she wasn't even out then! Still, Janet Pallant is a very worldly woman. And then that other good-looking girl who was your bridesmaid—the one who was at school with you—Deborah Venning?"

"Oh, Deborah's quite well," said Gillian hastily. "I saw her quite lately."

"She must be terribly distressed, too. Why—she quite worshipped you, dear Gillian!"

"Did she? Well, yes, I suppose she is distressed!"

She spoke with intentional carelessness.

"People take these things so much more as a matter of course than they used to," said Miss Letitia regretfully; "I know dear Matty and I are not at all up-to-date, and it really shocks us to hear people speaking so plainly and openly of divorce and appendicitis and all sorts of horrors! There has been a great change for the worse since the dear Queen died." She dropped her voice to a respectful whisper, as if it were almost high treason to allude to the mortality of so illustrious a monarch. "Such an example of domestic—indeed, of *every* kind of virtue! She would not receive even the innocent person of a divorce case. It was a fault on the right side, dear Gillian. We little thought in those days that our own niece—our sister's daughter——"

"The unexpected always happens," interrupted Gillian, who dreaded her aunt's sentimental outbursts and was beginning to wish that Joan would arrive and put an end to all intimate conversation. "I dare say I wasn't the right wife for Aylmer. But he wanted a fresh inspiration, and I couldn't inspire him any more. Either I or his work had to go to the wall, so I went. It was a nasty hard wall, and it hurt me dreadfully, so please don't let us talk about it any more!"

"My dear, is it necessary because one writes poetry to lose all one's moral sense?" protested Miss Letitia. "I really don't know what dear Matty would say to such a dreadful suggestion. A man to sacrifice his wife to his work!"

"You must tell Aunt Matty that I wish I could have found time to run down to Bath for a few

days before I go, but it's simply impossible," said Gillian.

She pictured the little grey house in Brock Street, her sombre home for so many years. It faced the little grey street, but at the back its windows commanded a delicious view of the Park, where even now the crocuses must be alight with their golden fire, and the snowdrops peeping forth. . . .

Then Joan came in, plaintive and a little prickly when she first perceived the austere and ill-dressed presence of the younger Miss Stanway. She had looked forward to a *tête-à-tête* with Gillian.

Gillian said: "We're having tea early. Aunt Letty has to catch a train." She smiled carelessly at Joan.

"Yes, Miss Pallant—I've come up from Bath for the day. I couldn't leave Martha for more than one day, especially when she has such a bad cold in her head. I'm always afraid of her chest," said Miss Letitia with nervous volubility.

A disjointed conversation followed.

"Do you know Bath, Miss Pallant?"

"No—I've only passed through it in the train."

"It's delightful in the winter and early spring, in fact Martha and I are devoted to it all the year round. If you care for music there are first-rate concerts at the Pump Room. And the balls at Christmas and Easter—our young people there do really enjoy themselves! They're not at all dull, I assure you. And tennis and boating all the summer!"

"I'm sure it must be charming," said Joan in a bored, indifferent tone.

"Do have some cake, Joan," said Gillian.

"We have a house in Brock Street—I dare say dear Gillian has told you about it. But nowadays most people want to live on one of the hills, Bath-

wick, Sion, or Lansdown! Martha and I don't care very much for walking uphill now we are getting on in years. But we have a charming view of the Park from our back windows. Oh, I assure you Bath is a beautiful city. And the society is very good. And the education is excellent—we pride ourselves upon it. We always flattered ourselves that Gillian could not have had greater advantages in London!"

Gillian smiled. "I'm afraid, then, I'm not a credit to Bath," she said lightly. "And I'm sure it must be horribly shocked at me now!"

Miss Letitia flushed quite pink. "Ah, we old fogies don't discuss such things, dear Gillian. Martha did receive six letters of sympathy from very old and intimate friends, most delicately expressed if I may say so! I am thankful that nothing was mentioned in the local papers—we were so very much afraid that it might be! We have, you see, Miss Pallant, such a very large circle of acquaintances in Bath, and it is not the fashion there to seek for notoriety. It would have distressed us very much to be mentioned in connection with such an unfortunate case."

"I am sure you would have felt as if you had lost caste, dear Aunt Letty," said Gillian in a teasing tone, which only served to deepen the flush on her aunt's elderly cheek.

"My dear Gillian—how strangely you are talking. I am so glad dear Martha is not here to hear you. She so deprecates any frivolity of outlook where it is a question of—of *sin*!"

She uttered the last word below her breath. Gillian bit her lip, suppressing a smile. She would not have been surprised to hear that the front blinds had been drawn down in Brock Street on the day of her divorce. Joan glanced with indignant scorn at Miss Stanway. Did she understand Gillian so little that she could accuse her of frivolity? The implied re-

proach in her tone made Joan long ardently to take up the cudgels in defence of her friend.

She did not dare do this, upon reflection. She said slowly, looking straight at Mrs. Driscoll:

"Paul has gone back to Aldershot!"

She watched her closely as she spoke, with a kind of jealous vigilance, and wondered at the calm indifference of her answer.

"Has he? He seems to get no end of leave!"

"He was in a fiendish temper all the time he was up," said Joan vindictively.

Gillian looked up at her with an indulgent rather patronising smile; there was a hint of irony in her tone as she said:

"You both seemed to be a little on edge when I dined with you. I felt really quite sorry for Cousin Janet!"

Beneath the implied rebuke Joan flushed scarlet. She was thankful that at this moment Miss Stanway glanced at the clock and rose fussily to go with a little bustle appropriate to the occasion.

"Good-bye, Miss Pallant—such a pleasure to have met you again. My love to Janet. Good-bye, dearest Gillian—take care of yourself and be sure and write regularly—we shall be longing for news." She kissed her niece effusively on both cheeks. "And my dear, *dear* Gillian, do please remember poor Elsie Smith!" She waved a forefinger garbed in inky kid warningly at Gillian as she moved towards the door.

"Elise is going with you to see you off," said Gillian, laughing. "You've got lots of time, Aunt Letty. My very best love to Aunt Matty." She accompanied her into the hall, and Joan could hear further embraces being exchanged.

"Who on earth's Elsie Smith?" she asked rather sulkily when Gillian returned.

"A Bath girl who went to Rome and became a

Catholic," said Gillian, throwing herself wearily upon the sofa. A day of Miss Letitia had exhausted her completely. And the subject did not interest her; she wondered at the idle curiosity that had prompted Joan to return to it. "Have some more cake, Joan."

"No, thank you," said Joan. She put her cup down on the table. "So you have really made up your mind to go to Rome, Jill?"

"Yes, I hope to get off on Saturday afternoon. There's such a lot to do, what with giving up this flat. I almost wish now that I'd settled to go to Bath first. Only I'm not sure that Aunt Matty would not have expected me to wear mourning!"

There was silence. Joan found it difficult to talk to Gillian when she was in this satirical mood.

At last she said: "I'm sorry you're going so soon. I've hardly seen anything of you. And the other night when you came Paul simply monopolised you. And—I—I am your friend, Jill!"

"My dear Joan, for goodness' sake don't be jealous!"

Gillian was lying almost full length on the sofa, and the bright firelight played on her warm rose-coloured dress, and lit up her small, pale, sensitive face.

"I *have* felt jealous of Paul," said Joan, "he has no right to take you away from me." She spoke resentfully, turning her face from Gillian, for now there were tears in her eyes.

"You're talking nonsense!" cried Gillian angrily, "you have no business to come here and say such things to me! Taking me away from you, indeed! He is just as much my cousin as you are. What silly ideas you have, Joan!"

"But . . . he drove home with you. . . ."

"Well, why on earth shouldn't he?"

"He said I wasn't to bother you. . . ."

"I wish you'd take his advice then. Look here, Joan, I don't want to quarrel with you, but I've really got a most awful lot to worry me just now!"

"Oh, I know you have, Jill. I'm most awfully sorry for you. I only wish I could help you. I hate your going off alone like this. And Paul has been so unkind. He made out that you didn't want me here at all!"

"I shouldn't have asked you if I hadn't wanted to see you," said Gillian, taking a silver box from the table and extracting a cigarette which she lit and began to smoke. "If Paul told you that, he had no right to do so."

"I sometimes think," said Joan slowly, "that Paul has fallen in love with you."

When the words were out of her mouth she felt almost horrified at her own hardihood. Gillian was inclined to be angry as it was. Perhaps this suggestion would put a match to the flame.

For a moment Gillian did not speak.

"You have a perfectly diseased imagination," she said at last in cold, cutting tones. "And I wish you would keep your silly fancies to yourself. Why shouldn't Paul see me home? We have always been excellent friends." She frowned.

"You know Paul never puts himself out for anybody. Mother says he seems to dislike girls. She's awfully anxious he should marry Lady Blanche Ethan."

"Paul will choose for himself when the time comes, you may depend upon that," said Gillian, who feared no rival in Lady Ferner's fair-haired younger daughter. "I strongly advise you not to interfere with him and his concerns. Men don't like it, Joan. He is sure to resent it if you keep a watch upon his movements."

Joan flushed to the roots of her hair. She had not been able to resist the impulse of curiosity that had prompted her to go to the window and watch Gillian drive away with—as she had feared—Paul.

She changed the subject, for clearly this was one upon which Gillian was not inclined to speak temperately; she was showing annoyance and contempt, and her words had made Joan smart. She felt that she had been small and petty and jealous. . . .

"Does Deborah know you're going away?"

At the mention of Deborah, Gillian's face changed and grew hard.

"Yes," she said shortly.

"She's written then? I thought she hadn't written for ages."

Joan was utterly ignorant of any definite breach with Miss Venning.

"No, she didn't write! She came!"

"Came to see you! And is she *very* unhappy about you?"

"I don't think so," said Gillian in the same curt tone. "I didn't ask her."

Joan was jealously suspicious of this sudden, mysterious recrudescence of Deborah—Deborah, who for so long had been High Priestess in the Temple, and who so strangely preferred in these days to tend bulbs and roses in a Surrey garden.

"Did she look very pretty?"

"Much as usual," replied Gillian indifferently.

Joan said: "Paul never admired her, you know. He thought she was painted."

Joan longed to hear more details of this interview, why Deborah had come, and when, and what she had said. There must have been an unexpected rapprochement, for she felt certain that of late years there had been a coolness if not an estrangement be-

tween these two friends. A fear filled her heart that perhaps, after all, Deborah would accompany Gillian abroad. . . . Still, it was only natural that Mrs. Driscoll's friends should crowd round her now, to support her and show their sympathy in this time of trial. It was only natural that Deborah should forget any petty quarrel and rally to her friend's side. . . .

But Gillian was evidently not disposed to be communicative on the subject; she appeared disinclined to discuss Miss Venning, just as she had appeared disinclined to discuss Paul. . . . The only thing that seemed to interest her was the prospect of her approaching departure. It held for her no pain of parting, only an immense relief, as if she were about to free herself from unendurable fetters. Joan felt that this attitude was quite cruel. She was suffering at the thought of Gillian's departure; she would like to have felt that her pain was in some sense shared. But this affair of the divorce had seemed to turn Gillian into stone; she seemed insensible to any pain. And if she had cared for Paul, surely, surely she would not go away like this, as if she were thankful to go. Was she unkind and sharp to Paul too? Was this perhaps the reason of his gloom, his strange, morose melancholy?

When she rose to go Joan put her arms timidly round Gillian. "Do write as often as you can, Jill," she said.

"I never can find anything to say in letters," said Gillian. "It will take me all my time to write to the aunts."

"But just to say how you are—that you have arrived."

"I'm sure to arrive, but if there's a railway accident you'll see it in the papers. And I'm always quite well. I'm quite vulgarly healthy."

"And then I shall want to know dreadfully where you are——"

"Oh, well, that's soon said. I'll send you a picture postcard."

"I *hate* picture postcards!"

"Well, postcards without pictures then! You're very hard to please!" She laughed, and then bent down and kissed Joan. "Give my love to Cousin Janet. And I hope to hear soon of your engagement to Captain Grant."

"I'm not sure that I like him at all," said Joan, "he's got red hair."

Gillian laughed.

"And then—he's Paul's friend."

"So much the better."

As she passed through the hall, Joan saw a letter lying on the polished oak table. It was addressed to Mrs. Driscoll in Paul's handwriting. There was no mistaking that neat, scholarly hand. Joan reddened as she saw it; she felt almost as if she had been prying. . . . Then jealousy seized her tooth and claw. . . . Why was he writing to Jill? Had they some secret understanding from which they were purposely excluding her? What could be in the letter? And what would Jill find to say in reply—she who had just acknowledged that she could never think of anything to say in letters? She wouldn't send Paul picture postcards. As Joan went down in the lift the tears gathered in her eyes, making them burn and smart; she choked back a sob. Gillian had been really unkind to her to-day. She had been in one of her queer moods, reserved, inclined to be irritable and angry. What did it all mean? And now Paul was writing to her. He must have written to her indeed the moment he got back. Was Jill expecting to hear from him?

The letter was brought to Gillian just after Joan

had gone. She smiled as she took it up. "Joan must have seen it," she thought. Then she was angry with herself because the surmise had disturbed her, because there should be anything between herself and Paul that Joan—that all the world—might not know. . . . "Joan will be more jealous than ever, now," she thought as she opened the letter. It began "*My dear, dear Gillian.*" She saw that there were two whole sheets closely written. . . .

CHAPTER VII

IT was the first love-letter she had received from Paul Pallant, and as she sat there alone, reading it by the fire, something of its warmth seemed to reach and touch her heart. And again she experienced the conviction, strengthened anew by those passionate written words, that it was wrong for her to listen to words of love, just as wrong, in fact, as it would have been for her to do so in the days before the law had cut in twain the knot that bound her to Aylmer Driscoll.

Gillian as a young happy wife had formed few friendships. She had had but little opportunity indeed for forming them. Her own little world had sufficed. There had been Aylmer monopolising all that first year, a possessive jealous Aylmer who ardently adored her. Then there had come the child to share with him the love of Gillian. There had been room for little else. Deborah, the Pallants, the two old aunts in Bath, had but hovered on the threshold of a world that held only husband and child. Aylmer at work, Aylmer idle (as only the poet can be idle in days that lack inspiration), Aylmer loving and exacting, then Aylmer bored, indifferent, and socially occupied, drifting on into Aylmer the Changed. That a man who had cared so passionately should all at once cease to care at all, had utterly confused for Gillian all the issues of life, depriving them of firm foundation. Aylmer and Deborah—these two had in turn possessed all her confidence and almost all her love. They had betrayed her. . . . The Pallants, Paul and Joan, were striving assiduously to occupy those empty dream-haunted places, and she had tried with equal energy

to close the gates of those abodes upon them. She would not even admit to herself that she was beginning to care for Paul Pallant. But his caress had stirred across her cold and chilly solitudes; she had permitted it, surrendering herself to the passing passion of it, and then afterwards she had bitterly blamed herself for doing so. She had felt thankful and relieved when Joan announced that Paul had returned to Aldershot.

Her palace of former days had fallen into ruins as though crumbled by an earthquake. She must go away and build up the bricks and set about making a new life for herself. Other women had done it successfully, had learned at last the secrets of peace and tranquillity beyond the sphere of actual human happiness. She could surely learn to do this, too, although she was still so young. Young? She felt at times incredibly old. She could never trust love again, no matter how splendid the guise he wore, no matter how desirably he presented himself to her. Love could never deceive her again. . . .

But in spite of herself the dark beauty of Paul Pallant's face haunted her. She heard again his words, "*Dear heart, how I love you!*" They had melted her stoniness; they had touched her wound with soft and healing fingers. . . . Only she would not let herself dream of Paul. She belonged still in some horrible fashion to Aylmer—Aylmer who did not want her any more, who had ceased utterly to love her. How could she love and marry another man while Aylmer lived? Even when he married Deborah—if he ever did such a thing—she would still feel as if she were his wife.

Another picture rose before her—Deborah stimulating, encouraging, inspiring Aylmer in his work. . . . She remembered even now the criticism in a leading London newspaper that had sent him fleeing

into Surrey a year after the child's death. "Inspiration seems suddenly to have failed Mr. Aylmer Driscoll. This book is only a weak repetition of his former work. He plagiarises himself and trusts to his public's inattention and lack of memory."

Yet—was it not absurd to think that a mere review could so change the destinies of two people? *Il n'y a que la vérité qui blesse*, and Aylmer had no doubt been sharply pricked by the truth of that paragraph of cheap printing. It had confirmed perhaps his own fears. Inspiration had failed. Gillian had ceased to inspire. He could never again touch the heights of the Gillian sonnets, so cordially detested by Paul. Yes, his best work had been written for her, had been laid at her feet—there was no doubt of that—in the beautiful days of their engagement, their happy marriage. But now—inspiration had failed. She herself had known and realised it long before the anonymous reviewer happened upon the unfortunate truth. His work had seemed to her just then such a secondary thing in the face of the immense loss of her baby. How could he write poetry at such a time? She had never been able to understand the writing of *In Memoriam*. If Tennyson had really loved Arthur Hallam, would he have taken the whole world into his intimate confidence so soon? Or was everything to the poet mere "copy"? Death and sorrow, heart-breaking, nerve-racking sorrow that tore your heart in two—even love that should be too sacred for speech—were all these things but base metal to be transmuted into gold?

Oh, from the first she had wished that their very love might be a secret, silent, hidden thing. She had longed to say, "Don't write about our love, Aylmer," but she had not dared. The beauty of his words held her, the music of them, the splendour.

. . . Then she had felt an immense pride in the world's recognition, the world's praise. . . . But her sorrow, no—he must not touch that, lest it should stab her wound to a new unendurable agony. He wrote of it, and Gillian felt her heart turn to stone. . . . If there had ever been any sensible diminution of her own love for him it had been then when he sang aloud of her sacred grief. . . .

She, wrapped up in her grief, confused and bewildered like a child, had ceased to inspire. He had turned to Deborah—a sunny picture of tranquillity in a flower setting. The *Garden of Delight* was published in the following spring, and a chorus of praise greeted the new venture. Its sale eclipsed all Aylmer's previous books.

"I'm really quite grateful to little Miss Venning for giving me the freedom of her garden," he had said gaily to Gillian.

And Gillian had said in a strained cold tone—even then she suspected nothing—"I'm sure it will succeed. Gardens are all the fashion. Is the frontispiece one of Deborah's own photographs?"

Perhaps it was then that a secret tormenting envy of Deborah first assailed her. There was something brave and wholesome and strong in the personality of that girl gardener. Something that spoke of freedom, of fresh winds sweeping over Surrey heaths and commons, of dancing shadow and sunlight patterning the North Downs. And she—what was she but a sickly woman who could not throw off the chains of a consuming grief?

"Yes, Miss Venning took it," Aylmer had replied carelessly, "she is a very clever little photographer."

As she sat there with Paul's letter in her hand she went over the little story, tracing it link by link in all its piteous futility and failure. In all those years she had not thought of Paul at all. He and Joan

had seemed mere phantom figures; even her friendship with Joan had not been at all an intimate one. She could have wept anew now at the pitiless havoc wrought by Deborah Venning.

Gillian did not see Paul again before she left England. The letter told her he had had a slight accident to his foot which kept him a prisoner in his own quarters. He begged her to put off her departure for a few days in order that he might see her again. But she desired above all things to avoid such a meeting. She shrank from a definite understanding with Paul. He made her feel weak when she was in his presence. She felt certain that if she consented to see him again he would extract a definite promise from her. And she wanted to be free—quite free; to turn a fresh page amid new surroundings, new people. And already she knew that she was no longer wholly indifferent to Paul. He loved her, and the love he offered her was one she could rely upon and trust. There was something secure and strong about him; something rocky and unchanging. She knew that in his hands she would be safe. The thought attracted her. He could give her all the things she had missed. Nevertheless she shrank from giving him an answer, an assurance that when she was free she would be his wife. That was what his letter plainly demanded of her in clear terms. He loved her, and if necessary he would sacrifice his career in order that he might marry her. She was more to him than all the world. "Do you think," he wrote, "that these last four years have meant nothing to me? If I hardly ever saw you, it was because I *would* not see you. I have loved you from the first moment of our first meeting."

No, she could not see him again; she felt glad to think that he could not come to London. She would hasten her preparations and leave a little earlier

than she had said. She would not even tell Joan when she was going. Life had resolved itself for the moment into a harmless scheme to outwit the Pallant family. They seemed to be pressing her on all sides.

Gillian left town on Friday evening and journeyed to Folkestone, where she spent the night. Before leaving for Paris by the morning boat she scribbled a little note to Lady Pallant informing her of her departure. That would be a bomb-shell for the Pallants on Saturday evening! She pictured ironically Joan's tears, Lady Pallant's slighted dignity at not having been informed before the event, and last of all Paul's wounded anger. Yes, Paul would learn through his own people that she had gone. It would show him how little she regarded him; how free she felt. It would break even the slight bond between them; it would prevent him from attaching too much importance to those repented kisses.

As the steamer neared Boulogne she saw that the sun was shining on the clustered red roofs and upon the green surrounding landscape. The sky was quite blue above the town. She lunched and then left for Paris by the next train. Even now she was afraid that Paul might somehow learn of her departure and follow her.

But his letter reposed in the little handbag she carried on her wrist, and more than once during her journey through the flat plains of France, guarded by those endless avenues of still leafless poplars, she took it out and read it through from beginning to end. She might put the seas between herself and Paul Pallant, but his love surrounded and enveloped her; she could not shake herself free from the comforting remembrance of it. Her heart questioned if she really desired that freedom she was going forth to seek.

CHAPTER VIII

SPRING had already come to Rome when Gillian reached that city early in March. The air was mild; the skies were wonderfully soft and blue. She established herself at first in a furnished apartment in the Via Sistina, not daring as yet to face the stir of hotel life. She shrank from contact with strangers until this first sense of being utterly and completely alone had passed off a little. It would be easy enough to move later on. The case of *Driscoll v. Driscoll* was still too fresh in the public mind. Her very name would, she felt, excite comment among the English colony in Rome. "The wife of Aylmer Driscoll, the poet—you know, she divorced him," she could almost hear those words of shame testifying to her failure. Raw and sensitive, with her wound still so recent, Gillian kept very much to herself in those first days. She spent her time diligently sight-seeing.

A green glimpse of Monte Mario visible from her windows comforted her with thoughts of the quiet country. The sun set there in soft tones of crimson and gold, not very brilliant but clear with pure luminous colour, making the obelisk on the Piazza Trinità look like an inky finger. The street with its busy little shops interested her. Antiquary shops, jewellers, lace-vendors, vied with each other in producing things likely to attract the passing tourist; in other windows picture postcards, Roman pearls and sashes, and cheap marble reproductions seemed to renew the innocent rivalry. In the afternoon crowds of carriages of all kinds and descriptions passed by on their way to the Pincio and the Borghese Gardens. The weather was brilliantly fine, and Gillian

enjoyed the sunshine, the warmer climate; it revived and refreshed her. She was already much less nervous than when she left London.

But she did not enjoy her solitude many weeks. There appeared in Rome a certain Lady Lucy Ferrard with her younger daughter Patience. The elder one was already married to Marchese della Meldola, and it was to be near her for a little that they had come to Rome on their way home from Egypt, where they had been spending the winter.

Lady Lucy Ferrard was a brisk purposeful woman who belonged to an old Catholic family. Her views were rigid, and she was old-fashioned in many ways. Patience Ferrard was a girl of nineteen, soft, fair, and malleable. Her sister, Marchesa Meldola, was a few years older, and was already the mother of a beautiful little boy. Both sisters were pretty in a soft English way, lacking perhaps in individuality and not overburdened with intelligence or education. Lady Lucy had heard nothing of Gillian's divorce when she met her one day walking in the Corso. It was a hot day, and the heat had deepened Lady Lucy's naturally rich colouring to a conspicuous purple. She was even panting a little and wondering whether she should walk home to the hotel or take a *carozza*. Both ladies were alone when this encounter took place.

"My dear Gillian—I had no idea you were in Rome!" cried Lady Lucy, holding out a fat hand gloved tightly in white kid.

Gillian flushed.

"I haven't been here very long," she said.

Unconscious of danger, Lady Lucy pursued:

"I hope Mr. Driscoll is well? Where are you staying? You must both come and have luncheon with us!"

"I am alone here," said Gillian.

"Alone?" echoed Lady Lucy in astonishment.

"Yes." Gillian's voice dropped. She looked for a moment wildly around her as if searching for an avenue of escape. Then as if recognising the futility of the contemplated manœuvre, she added simply, "We are not—together any more. I have divorced him!"

"Divorced him!" repeated Lady Lucy incredulously. My dear child, what a dreadful thing to do!"

She stared at Gillian in horrified amazement.

"Is—is it so dreadful?" Her face whitened; she looked as if she were going to cry.

"Of course it is dreadful!" said Lady Lucy with brisk decision. "And at your age! Why, you can hardly be any older than Imogen! You shock me inexpressibly. You speak, too, as if you did not in the least realise what an awful step you have taken. To separate yourself legally from the man you have married. . . ."

Her keen eyes searched Mrs. Driscoll's face.

"He wished it so much," said Gillian, and her lips trembled as she spoke. "He begged me to do it—I should never have dreamed of divorcing him—if he hadn't wished it. I have always been weak whenever I have seen any one wanting anything—anything it was in my power to give!"

"Why did he wish for it?" inquired Lady Lucy severely.

They had walked now as far as the Via Condotti and were going towards the Piazza di Spagna.

"He didn't say," said Gillian; "I could only suppose it was because he was tired of me—and wanted to marry some one else."

"In our Church such a thing would be utterly impossible," said Lady Lucy.

Gillian walked silently by her side with her eyes fixed on the ground.

"I feel extremely sorry for you, Gillian," said Lady Lucy presently in a more kindly tone. "You must come and see us. I must ask you, however, not to discuss it with Patience—it would be better not to mention it to her at all. Of course now that Imogen is married she is permitted more liberty. . . . I have kept my girls very sheltered. We came here on purpose to see a little of Imogen and Guido Meldola."

She did not add that one of her principal motives for coming to Rome was to endeavour to engineer a marriage between Patience and Guido della Meldola's half-brother Giacomo. The winter in Egypt had proved fruitless from a matrimonial point of view, and the Ferrards were not at all well off. Lady Lucy, who combined a good deal of worldliness with her piety, held the opinion that Patience's type was not one that improved with years. It was at its prettiest in extreme youth when the fair, delicate colouring had not begun to lose its charm. It behoved Patience to marry young, and Giacomo della Meldola was an even better *parti* than his elder half-brother, as his mother had brought into the family some wealthy and valuable property in the Abruzzi.

When a few days later Gillian was invited to dine with them at one of the immense new hotels in the Via Veneto she found the party was a purely family affair. It consisted of Lady Lucy Ferrard, Patience, Imogen, and Guido della Meldola, and a tall, thin dark young man who proved to be Giacomo.

He spoke English well and fluently, for he had been educated at Beaumont and since then had been more than once in London. Although he was only twenty-two years of age he looked older, and he was excessively handsome in a way that was quite new to Gillian. He was a typical Roman, with

finely-cut features and eyes that only just missed being too beautiful for a man. Patience secretly adored him, had guessed her mother's plan of campaign, yet despaired in her heart of attaining to a fate that seemed to her so eminently desirable. For Giacomo had so far displayed no intention of falling in love with the docile, sweet-looking English girl.

The family of Meldola were Black in their sympathies, and Giacomo had been very carefully brought up by his mother who adored him. His father had not long survived his second marriage, and this only child had been very dear to the Marchesa, who had long passed her first youth when he was born.

Giacomo was an officer in the Italian cavalry. Upon their first introduction Gillian thought she had never seen any one so handsome. "A beautiful boy," she called him to herself. With regular features, dark lambent eyes, and thick, densely black hair with the merest hint of a wave in it, he was tall, graceful, and slenderly built, and looked perhaps his best in uniform. Their eyes met across the dinner-table, and Giacomo, the ambition and despair of Roman mothers, was literally swept off his feet.

The tragic experience of the past had given Gillian a slightly pathetic look which was enhanced by the contour of her features, the naturally wistful expression of her eyes. Strange, sad eyes that held Giacomo while he was present and haunted him after he had gone away. She made Patience look colourless and immature—not that he had ever thought seriously of Patience. There was a far more dangerous *prétendante* then sojourning in Rome in the person of Miss Grace Widness, the charming and beautiful young daughter of the American millionaire, Mr. Homer S. Widness. Giacomo

was aware that his mother regarded with favour the claims of Grace Widness. She was very fair, with hair like spun silk and clear eyes of forget-me-not blue. She was a Catholic, highly educated and well brought up, and her dowry would probably be counted by tens of thousands. She was an only child, and the old Marchesa felt that she was a girl to whom the future of Giacomo could most safely and desirably be entrusted. But she was too wise to say anything to hurry on events, and she gave her son no definite information as to the trend of her hopes. It will thus be seen that Patience, ignorant of the existence of Miss Widness, had even slenderer grounds for hope than she herself was aware of.

Gillian felt attracted by the homage in the young man's eyes. To many women there is attraction in the very mystery of a man who belongs to a different race and country from their own. He was the first Italian she had met, and for that very reason she felt interested in him. There was something in his eager, simple vivacity that appealed to her. He possessed that curious combination of simplicity and subtlety which is so characteristic of the Latin. It is difficult for the Anglo-Saxon to be intellectual without being at the same time complex. But for the Latin this is not difficult. With all his cleverness, his knowledge of the world, there was something young and unspoilt about Giacomo. Gillian encouraged him to talk, heard of the years passed at Beaumont College, of the subsequent visits to England, where a cousin held a post in the Embassy; more diffidently too, he spoke of his own city, whose history he had studied deeply. He was an attractive, sympathetic companion; he made the evening pass pleasantly for her. Before they parted he had—unknown to the Ferrards—elicited a prom-

ise from her that she would accompany him on an expedition to Frascati on the following day. His American friends, the Widnesses, with their daughter were also to be of the party. He had not invited any one else. They were to lunch at the hotel, and afterwards visit some of the villas. He arranged to call for her at a certain hour in his motor. Gillian accepted gladly; she liked to think they were to meet again so soon. She began to think that those first days of solitude in Rome must have been extraordinarily dull. . . .

On the following morning he appeared alone in his motor.

"I am going to drive you myself," he announced, smiling.

"Oh, I thought your friends were coming too," she said.

"They are going to meet us at Frascati. I had asked Miss Widness to come with us, but she has gone with her parents—they preferred that arrangement." He pulled a wry, expressive grimace. "Miss Widness, as you will see, is almost too precious to tread the ground of this wicked world. So they keep her up there—in an aeroplane!" He laughed, and pointed to the dark blue serene sky that hung above Rome. "I am glad," he added simply; "I wished to have this drive alone with you, Mrs. Driscoll."

Neither he nor the Widnesses were acquainted with Mrs. Driscoll's history; indeed, if Giacomo considered the matter at all, it is probable that he believed her to be a young widow. Gillian, without the slightest wish to sail under false colours, was thankful to be with strangers—people who were agreeable and pleasant and to whom her melancholy little history was altogether unknown. It did

not occur to her that the young man, by whose side she was speeding so swiftly through the enchanting ways of the Roman Campagna, was already beginning to fall in love with her. She had never realised her own beauty nor her own fascination. Any pride she might have had in her physical or mental equipment had received a severe blow from the defalcation of Aylmer. And she was accustomed to the simple friendship that a woman, whether married or single, can enjoy with men in England. As the wife of a celebrity she had met with a good deal of admiration and attention, and had never valued them at all. She had absolutely no knowledge of the Latin temperament. And she liked Giacomo; his gaiety made the remembrance of Paul Pallant seem a little melancholy and strenuous.

They sped rapidly across the plain, past ancient tombs, and the massive ruined arches of the old Roman aqueduct beneath whose shadows the sheep were peacefully grazing; past little homesteads and villages where the vineyards were bright with the first young golden leaves, and farms red-roofed and white-walled surrounded by blossoming fruit trees and olive groves of shining silver. Beyond, the hills lay as if asleep in the sunshine—those pale, misty, delicately coloured Alban hills upon whose higher summits the snow was still visible in patches of glimmering white. And in the valley, spring with her gay garlands and blossoming orchards, mocked at those snows.

In their swift progress they passed without awakening many a slumbering *carrettiere* droning across the plain in rough, blue-painted market carts. Sometimes they passed a little wayside inn with groups of peasants sitting drinking under a pergola of budding vine.

Gillian sat there entranced, her eyes fixed on the

delicious outlines of the hills, softly painted in tones of blue and green against a sky of pure sapphire. Once they stopped and looked back upon Rome when they had partly ascended the hill that leads steeply to Frascati. The huge dome looked like a bubble, immense, almost transparent, a filmy unsubstantial thing. Monte Soracte stood alone in solitary aloof grandeur, breaking the horizon to the north with its fine blue outline shaped like a crouching lion with its head drooping upon its paws. The wide, shining line of the sea showed grey and gold to the westward. High over their heads a lark sang in sustained rapture. Here on the higher slopes the woolly buds of the vines as yet scarcely showed a hint of delicate golden leaf within.

"Isn't it simply topping?" said Giacomo, smiling and showing his even white teeth.

Gillian laughed at the modern slang expression that sounded so strangely on alien lips.

"Oh, but topping," she agreed.

Impulsively he turned and caught her little grey-gloved hand and kissed it.

"You love it, too?" he asked, "our beautiful Rome?"

She became suddenly serious. She realised that he had asked the question in desperate earnest.

"Yes, I love it. One has the feeling that one belongs," she said in her cold, tranquil, unenthusiastic voice.

She had spoken simply, but he, subtle and intuitive, put a personal interpretation on her words.

"Who knows but some day you will belong? Rome will take you prisoner. I have known of people who came for a fortnight and who stayed twenty years—thirty years—until they died!"

He threw back his head and laughed exultantly, but his dark eyes swept her with a fierce, almost

dangerous light, and he took her hand in his again and held it for a moment. "I am beginning to love you," he said, and his voice held a hoarse, strained deep note that startled her. "Perhaps—who knows—you will be my prisoner!"

"Don't talk nonsense," she said sharply and angrily, and drew away her hand.

"Why?" he said, hurt at her tone, "why shouldn't I love you? Is there any reason?"

Gillian was not at all prepared to confide her private affairs in the ear of this attractive stranger. Had she yielded to her first impulse and done so she would certainly have saved herself from cruel complications and hurts in the future. But she purposely made an evasive answer.

"It's always a pity to love people who could never have anything to give you in return," she said in a chilling tone, and her eyes met his squarely. Oh, why could she not be permitted to forget just for one day that English past that held the dominating figure of Aylmer Driscoll? "Hadn't we better be going on?"

"If you will," he responded almost sulkily. He turned away from her and took the wheel in his hands. They climbed the hill that led between budding hedges to Frascati. On either side stretched the brown vineyards, decorated with a hint of fragile gold. Beyond the hedge a pear tree stood up covered with a mantle of snowy blossom that suggested bridal array.

"I have a little villa here," said Giacomo, perceiving that his talk of love had been premature and ill-advised, and had found no favour with this Englishwoman with the dark, cold eyes that were at once so beautiful and so mysteriously sad. "Some day when the weather is warmer I will give a dinner-party. You must come, and we will drive back

by moonlight. Oh, you can't imagine what the Campagna looks like by moonlight—a wide silver sea with purple and black shadows and little scarves of mist that try and hide themselves in the hollows and look like fairies. You have never seen it, have you?"

She shook her head.

"Ah, you will say, too, that it looks just like the sea—like a strange Dead Sea with the tombs—those lonely, forgotten, desolate tombs—rising above the surface. And beyond lies the real sea shining like silver."

She quoted softly:

"The champaign with its endless fleece
Of feathery grasses everywhere,
Silence and passion, joy and peace,
An everlasting wash of air—
Rome's ghost since her decease."

"Oh, I know *Two in the Campagna*," he surprised her by saying, as they sped forward into the dusty piazza through the long avenue where innumerable brown and happy children were playing. "To me it is one of the most understandable of Browning's poems. All English lovers who come to Rome quote it to each other. You must see the Campagna, too, on a morning of Rome and May."

They stopped outside the hotel which lay a little below the town. To reach it, Giacomo had had to retrace their steps a little and dip down a steep hill to the left of the avenue. Already in the loggia Mr. and Mrs. Homer Widness were standing awaiting them, with their daughter Grace, who looked charmingly dainty in a white cloth coat and skirt and a hat of white felt with a little blue wing in it that matched her clear innocent eyes. Gillian,

quite unconscious that Grace was now regarding her a little resentfully as a possible rival as well as an unsuspected peril, smilingly shook hands with them all. She remembered afterwards that she had thought Grace pretty—even very pretty in that studied, finished American way that leaves nothing to chance. Her hair was beautiful, golden and burnished, and it was most perfectly arranged. Her eyes were of a clear, bright blue, and her complexion was delicately pink and white behind the pretty white veil that was fastened with such skill around her hat. Gillian felt that the Widnesses must be proud of their daughter, and she recalled Giacomo's words in which he had described them as thinking her too precious to "tread the ground of this wicked world!" She looked at her almost with envy.

But Grace's thoughts of Gillian were perhaps less charitable. She knew that there was a project on foot for arranging a marriage between herself and Giacomo. Already she was very deeply in love with the handsome young Italian who had been showing her considerable attention all through the winter. He appealed to her young girl's imagination; his fresh, spontaneous, Latin gaiety attracted her. She felt jealous that he and Mrs. Driscoll should have had this long drive alone together. They had not even brought a chauffeur with them.

Luncheon was served in the garden at a small table on the terrace. It was a prolonged, rather leisurely meal. Once Mrs. Widness, referring to a recent audience of Pius X., inquired of Mrs. Driscoll if she were a Catholic.

When Gillian replied quickly in the negative, Grace heaved a sigh of relief. She knew old Marchesa Meldola's views, strict and unchangeable, with regard to the religion to which her son's future wife

must belong. If Mrs. Driscoll were not a Catholic there was not the slightest hope that Marchesa Meldola would consent to her marriage with Giacomo. Of other obstacles Grace knew nothing; she supposed Gillian to be a widow—of some standing perhaps, since she no longer wore any kind of mourning.

"I am afraid I really know very little about the Catholic Church," said Gillian almost apologetically.

Oddly enough her aunt's words echoed suddenly, almost warningly in her ears: "*Remember Elsie Smith!*" She thought of this unimportant weak-chinned girl in whom Rome had wrought such great and such vital changes, and curiously enough, together with these words of warning came also the remembrance of Giacomo's question that morning, "Who knows but some day you will belong? Rome will take you prisoner!"

"Perhaps Rome will stimulate your curiosity on the subject," said Mrs. Widness. "I," she continued, "belong to one of the oldest Catholic families in Maryland. We are very proud of our faith." She spoke with a simple earnestness.

"And I," said Giacomo, "am black as black! It would shock my dear mother very much to think of me as of any other colour. My father belonged to the *Guardia nobile*!" He flung back his small, dark head and laughed.

"Ah, your mother is a real saint, Marchese," said Mrs. Widness.

"Saints are very hard sometimes—they seem to think perfection such an easy thing!" he said gaily. He looked straight at Gillian as he spoke. How pretty she was with her slim bare white throat, and her delicate fragile-looking hands. "She would want to convert you at once, Mrs. Driscoll. Oh, you would be marched off to her pet nuns without

delay for instruction! One does not meet every day with zeal like my mother's."

Gillian was glad when the conversation took a more impersonal turn. After lunch they drove up to see some of the villas that stand above the town, and wandered idly through ilex woods, or stood and gazed at the view from sunny wistaria-hung terraces. The day was warm, and the hill air fresh and bracing. Gillian kept near Mrs. Widness. Mr. Widness went about alone, taking snapshots desultorily with a small hand camera, and thus Grace was left to wander with Giacomo—under her mother's consciously vigilant eye. Gillian felt some relief at this distribution. Although she did not in the least believe them, Giacomo's words, "I am beginning to love you," had alarmed her. Paul's case had warned her that she was still perhaps . . . lovable. That love still held for her its slings and arrows. . . .

"The Marchesa," said Mrs. Widness, "is a very devout Catholic."

"Yes?" said Gillian.

"I know her very well indeed," continued Mrs. Widness, "and I can see that she's anxious now about Giacomo. He's her only son, you know—Marchese Guido is her stepson. And he's not serious enough in her opinion. She's inclined to think he ought to marry young, as she's got a large fortune of her own and can make him a handsome allowance, but she wants to find just the right girl for him. There's that Miss Patience Ferrard now whose sister married Guido—a very pretty, nice girl and a good Catholic, but hardly a penny piece to her fortune. Giacomo is, of course, dependent upon his mother, and she's a healthy woman still, in the prime of life, although they say she's getting on for sixty. If she liked his wife I know she

would treat him generously. I gather she likes this Miss Ferrard well enough, but it seems she bores Giacomo."

Her clear, vigilant eyes were steadily fixed upon the two young figures going on ahead of them. Giacomo, with his dark head uncovered, moving with swinging strides, was talking and laughing; the echo of his laughter reached them. And Grace with face turned towards him was looking up at him, all attention and admiration.

"I'm not sure," said Mrs. Widness, "that Giacomo isn't taking a liking to my Grace!"

Gillian felt the colour deepen in her cheeks; the remembrance of the young Marchese's eager ardent words that morning made her feel a little self-conscious, even a little guilty.

"Your Grace is a lovely girl, Mrs. Widness," she said quite simply and sincerely.

"Well, naturally we think her quite lovely," said Mrs. Widness with a pleased smile, "and she's a good girl and a good Catholic!"

She seemed to be unconsciously summing up the points in Grace's favour—especially those which would appeal most forcibly to the very pious mother of an adored only son.

Gillian began to feel aware of very different standards from those which had obtained in Brock Street. There the very fact of becoming a Catholic was regarded almost as a disgrace; here it appeared to be the one thing essential that a girl should have this faith and practise it devoutly. Lost in these thoughts to which she was devoting an ironical attention, she was scarcely listening to the sustained flow of Mrs. Widness's conversation.

"But young men are the same all the world over, Mrs. Driscoll. They don't want to settle down too early. Maybe the right girl comes along too soon.

before they feel the need of a wife, and they lose her just as much as if she came too late! Giacomo doesn't strike me as being exactly a marrying man, he just wants to knock about and have a good time. He's too much of a boy, and he's inclined to run after every pretty face he sees!"

Gillian mentally agreed with this dispassionate estimate of the young man's character. But, judging from his conversation on the way to Frascati that morning, she was driven to the conclusion that Grace's chances were slighter even than her adoring mother supposed.

"For you see," continued Mrs. Widness, "he's been going around with the Ferrards every day almost since they came. We've been away down at Naples for a couple of months. But directly we came back and he saw Grace again he seemed to forget all about Patience!" She looked hard at Gillian, who felt that she was mentally finishing her sentence with the unspoken words, "and now he's seen you, I'm afraid he's going to forget all about Grace."

So strong was Gillian's conviction upon the point that again she felt the guilty colour rise in her cheeks. She felt angry with herself—angry with Giacomo because his words had made her feel thus guilty. It was absurd of a man to talk like that to a woman whom he had met for the first time the day before!

"As you say, Mrs. Widness, the Marchese is very young. He really seems almost too much of a boy to be thinking of marriage at all!"

She contrived to speak in a cold, indifferent voice. If swords were to be crossed thus early in the duel she was determined to show herself a match for this anxious mother.

"He's turned twenty-two," said Mrs. Widness,

"and Italians develop early, as you'll find when you've been a little longer in their country, Mrs. Driscoll. And then his mother wants him to marry a nice, well-brought-up Catholic girl with a little money."

She laid down these simple qualifications as the irreducible minimum of gifts, temporal and spiritual, that must be possessed by any aspirant for the post. Gillian suppressed a smile. She felt that each word was a dart, aimed at herself. Had Mrs. Widness thus early perceived the possibility of her capturing the fleeting fancy of this extremely susceptible Italian? And with the thought there came a sense of bitterness that she did not try to control. She saw the gulf that divided herself from a young girl like Grace.

She drew a swift mental comparison between Lady Pallant and this unknown elderly Italian noblewoman, the Marchesa della Meldola. Both the mothers of only sons, she felt that to neither of them would she be anything but most unwelcome as a daughter-in-law. Gillian realised that in both these instances she would be severely ruled out. And what mother of an only son would not rapturously welcome Grace Widness, with her youth, her dainty prettiness, her girlish innocence, and that fabulous *dot* which gossip averred would one day be hers, as a daughter-in-law that fulfilled all imagined ideals? Gillian bravely envisaged these unpalatable truths. It was not that she desired in the least to win Giacomo's love. He amused her; his admiration, so swiftly aroused, had touched her. Deserted by the man she had once loved, thrust by his hands into the dust, she felt that the spontaneous admiration of other men might bestow a healing balm upon her self-respect, her deeply wounded pride. She had

no wish seriously to disturb Giacomo's peace of mind. Only it seemed that Mrs. Widness of deliberate intent desired her to understand that there were already rival claimants of unassailable eligibility in the field. . . .

The realisation of her own complete unsuitability supplied her with a sufficiently humiliating sense of her inferiority to Grace Widness and to Patience Ferrard, who each in their own degree attained to the arbitrary standard laid down by the old Marchesa. For a moment she felt a little reckless. She longed to bring Giacomo to her feet in very earnest, so that she might defy and circumvent these mothers of marriageable daughters. It would not be a very difficult matter; she felt indeed that she could easily accomplish it. Had he not already told her that he was beginning to fall in love with her? A little exultant sense of her own power stirred within Gilian's heart. She had never used that power to bring Paul to her feet. And if she deliberately made up her mind to win Giacomo, putting her will into the affair with a cold relentlessness untouched by any emotion, surely she would succeed without any difficulty at all? She put the thought from her almost immediately as unworthy, a little undignified.

Giacomo and Grace now came towards them.

"I have a surprise for you all," said young della Meldola. "I want you all to come on to my villa for tea. I've telephoned to them to have it ready."

"Oh, but it's getting on for four o'clock now," objected Mrs. Widness, who thought young men should not be given all they demand without any discussion; "as it is we shall hardly be back in Rome before dark."

Giacomo smiled at Grace.

"Miss Widness—it is up to you—is not that the right American word?—to persuade your mother!" he said.

"Oh, do please let us, mamma," said Grace eagerly.

"We must ask Mr. Widness," said her mother to Giacomo. "He doesn't care to be out late in the Campagna—he thinks it isn't healthy."

But Mr. Widness offered no sort of objection. In all the smaller amenities of life he always allowed his wife to have her own way. He was a most easy-going, good-natured man, and as a husband and father he was almost without fault. That he was a little dull was really the only thing that could be alleged to his discredit. But even this fact was apt to be overlooked when people remembered the uncounted millions that were indubitably his.

Mr. Widness and his daughter accompanied Giacomo in his automobile on this occasion, while Gillian followed with Mrs. Widness in the luxurious closed limousine.

Giacomo's villa was situated amid delicious olive groves on the outskirts of Frascati. It was by no means a large one, but it was old and beautiful and its rooms, though few, were lofty and spacious. A great stone gateway stained by the sunshine and rain of centuries to that rich, golden brown which can never be imitated and whose secret lies in the hands of Time, enclosed the huge iron *portone* that was flung back as the motors approached by an elderly Italian woman who greeted Giacomo with an almost extravagant delight. A short avenue of cypresses led up to the house that nestled against a background of veiling ilex woods. The high, creamy walls were decorated with endless garlands of wistaria that in its soft shades of greyish mauve

seemed to harmonise well with the subdued grey-green of the ilex trees. The idle plash of a fountain, the waving palms, the deep and wide loggia supported by creamy pillars, gave an almost Oriental aspect to the place.

Across the gateway Banksian roses trailed their young shoots, displaying here and there a cluster of creamy buds. Lilac bushes smothered with blossom flung their pervading scent into the warm air, and the Judas trees flamed purple as the heather on an August moorland—too beautiful, alas, to be thus associated for ever with the name of the Master-Traitor. The grassy slopes, spreading away from the terraced paths, were strewn thickly with wild flowers, with cyclamen and violets, and wood anemones in every variety of delicate hue, pink, periwinkle blue, snow-white and deepest purple. Great bushes of genista were gay with flaming gold. Shady paths, pale and narrow, dipped enticingly into the woods, and here and there a break in the trees revealed slopes filled with olive groves that glistened with flecks of polished silver, long avenues of cypress spires, and the pale gold and green of chestnut trees, maples and poplars, all wearing the first tender garments of spring.

By a low white wall that enclosed the garden on its western front Giacomo and Gillian stood side by side and looked over the Roman Campagna, lying out there misty and indeterminate in the fading light. It was like some dream sea, painted in dimmest tones of lavender and grey and palest green as if it were seen through a delicate veil of fragile, insubstantial silver gauze. All the detail of it was undefined, almost blurred, except for the slender white roads that cut across it like wandering ribbons. And far off in the midst of the plain lay Rome, whose seven hills appeared from those

heights like seven mounds, while the immense cupola looked almost as if it were suspended above the vast sun-bleached city. Far off, too, on the western horizon a wide golden glimmer of light revealed the sea lying under a pallid serene sky illuminated by the sinking sun.

Giacomo's eyes met Gillian's. There was a look in them of almost passionate interest. She coloured a little under that fixed glance.

"Well, do you like it here?" he said, and waited for her reply.

"Very much indeed," she replied.

"I am glad," he said. "I arranged to come here on purpose that *you* might see it."

They turned and went into the house and found that tea was already awaiting them in the old salon with its painted ceilings and fine if decaying furniture. The roomy armchairs covered with chintz struck the only modern note.

Mrs. Widness poured out the tea and Giacomo handed bread-and-butter and cakes. Gillian sat near the window; the scene without fascinated her and she paid little heed to the conversation at first. Outside the sun, drooping slowly, gilded faintly the grey glimpse of Rome. It looked now like a city of mirage, fragile, unreal. The sea was a pale golden shield seen through webs of gossamer. The ilex trees cast long shadows on the turfed slopes.

"Mrs. Driscoll likes my house," said Giacomo suddenly, and at the sound of her own name Gillian looked up sharply.

"Especially this most beautiful view," she said.

"Yes," he said, "the view is enchanting. I am quite a new householder—this place has only belonged to me since I came of age. It is my only share of the Meldola property—Guido has all the rest. But I like it best of all. When I am married

I intend to spend my honeymoon here. I am not going to frighten my bride out of her wits by taking her to my mother's ghostly old castle in the Abruzzi!"

The fair face of Grace Widness flashed a vivid pink. She looked a little confused at this careless revelation of matrimonial plans. She glanced at Gillian, whose lips were parted in the little ironical, disillusioned smile that was becoming so frequent with her.

"Don't you ever live here?" Gillian inquired of Giacomo.

"Oh, my mother comes here in August for part of her *villeggiatura*, and I sometimes spend a week or two here with her. It's very dull," he confessed with a slight grimace, "only we two. I prefer the Abruzzi, where I can get a little shooting. But on my honeymoon I shall not want to shoot!"

But he did not look at Grace Widness as he said the words. For a second his eyes rested upon Gillian, then he turned away and began to speak of other things. But Grace had intercepted that fugitive glance. There had been in it a strange mixture of humourous self-scorn, of complacency, of deliberate, considered adoration. Jealousy plunged its cold steel sickeningly into her heart. She had enjoyed her girlish triumph over Patience Ferrard; now was she, too, in her turn to be dispossessed? She comforted herself a little by thinking, "It would be absurd. Mrs. Driscoll must be *much* older than he is. Besides, she's a Protestant." But the comfort was short-lived. Protestants could always become Catholics, and indeed very frequently did so. And she was obliged to confess that Gillian's age could not be regarded as an insuperable obstacle, at most she could be but a year or two older. "I wonder

how long her husband's been dead," was her next unspoken comment.

The finished daintiness of the Englishwoman evoked her admiring envy. Her delicate dark beauty must, she felt, put her own more obvious charms into the shade. But she did not fall down and worship Gillian Driscoll as Deborah Venning and Joan Pallant had each in their turn done. Her rapidly deepening love for Giacomo, that until to-day had been buoyed up by all kinds of girlish hopes, prevented such immature worship. She wanted to defend him against Gillian—this strange woman with the cold eyes and smile, of whom they knew so little. . . .

"How shall we go home?" said Giacomo, turning to Gillian as the two cars came up to the door. "Will you trust yourself to me again?"

"Grace must come with me," interrupted Mrs. Widness, paying no heed to the last part of the young man's sentence. "I can't let her go in an open car just at sunset. She'd be getting fever in the Campagna. I advise you to come with us too, Mrs. Driscoll. The gentlemen have got their great-coats, which makes a difference!"

Gillian submitted to this suggestion with one of her sudden accesses of prudence, and accompanied the mother and daughter back to Rome. Grace was silent, perhaps even a little sulky, although it was a relief to have her rival under her own eye. But the disappointed expression on Giacomo's face when Gillian got into the car had not escaped her. She felt that for some reason or other he had desired very strongly to escort Gillian home. And in any case she herself would never have been permitted to go alone with him, her father would most certainly have accompanied them. Mrs. Widness conformed most rigidly to the customs and con-

ventions of the country in which she found herself, and allowed her daughter much less liberty in Italy than American girls usually enjoy.

"If Grace wants an Italian husband," she thought to herself with good-humoured complacency, "she musn't fly in the face of all their notions of propriety!"

But even she realised that this young and independent English widow constituted a danger both proximate and imminent.

CHAPTER IX

GIACOMO arrived first at the hotel; they found him awaiting them on the steps.

"May I drive you back to Via Sistina?" he inquired of Gillian.

"No, thank you. I'm going to walk."

She turned to say good-bye to the Widness family, and having done so walked slowly away with Giacomo by her side. Mrs. Widness called after her:

"Are you sure you won't go in our car, Mrs. Driscoll?"

Gillian shook her head, smiling.

"No, thank you. I really prefer to walk."

She turned into the Via Venti Settembre, and Giacomo was still by her side. "When shall I see you again?" he asked.

"Will you dine with me to-morrow night?"

"I shall be delighted."

"Don't come any further now, please," said Gillian; "you'd better go back to your car, hadn't you?"

She had detected signs of disapproval on Mrs. Widness's face and of disappointment on Grace's. Gillian was always miserable in an atmosphere of disapproval, and she did not wish to become the subject of discussion and gossip.

"But it's so far for you to walk alone—and it's nearly dark," he objected. "I want to walk with you."

She felt flattered at his obvious eagerness to accompany her.

"Please don't," she said simply, and held out her hand. "You know we Englishwomen are accustomed to going about alone."

Reluctantly he accepted his dismissal. He went sulkily back to the hotel and resisted Mrs. Widness's invitation to dine with them. He had not seen his mother all day, he explained, and she would be expecting him.

He dined alone with Gillian on the following night. The furnished apartment she had taken belonged to an American artist and his wife, and it was full of beautiful things, pictures, china, and lovely old furniture. In the morning Gillian had gone down to the Piazza di Spagna and had bought immense bunches of long-stalked pink roses with which she had lavishly decorated the *salotto*. It looked charming, and as the evening was chilly she had had a wood fire lighted which gave it an aspect of cheerful warmth.

Gillian wore a dress of shell-pink crêpe fashioned very softly with long straight lines that made her look very slender and graceful. She felt a little nervous as she sat there waiting for Giacomo. But when he came in he set her at once at her ease. He sat down and began to talk to her of all he had done that day, of his mother, of their expedition to Frascati. He looked very handsome, his eyes were very bright, and he threw back his head with that now familiar gesture and smiled at her. There was something at once boyish and experienced about Giacomo.

He was very happy to-night and his spirits had risen to correspond with the occasion. He was enchanted to find himself *en tête-à-tête* with this beautiful, fascinating Englishwoman. His Latin curiosity was aroused, and he longed to know her history. How delightful to hear it from her own lips! He almost hoped that it might be a sad one. Had she been happy with this unknown English husband? Had his death affected her profoundly? She was

still so young to have traversed all these experiences. Yet her eyes taught him that she had not glided easily nor always serenely over hard ways. There had been perhaps hard struggles, sharp moments of pain, weariness, even rebellion. He wondered if she would ever unfold the pages of that sealed book to him. She would find him all sympathy and attention. Her beauty, that suggestion of silence and elusiveness about her, stimulated powerfully his imagination. It seemed to him the silence of one who dares not rather than of one who cannot speak. He thought of Patience Ferrard, of Grace Widness—young girls whose rank or fortune made them eligible in his mother's eyes—and turned wearily from the contemplation of them. . . . Only to-day his mother had actually approached him on the subject of Grace Widness.

Gillian looked up and saw his dark wonderful eyes fixed upon her.

"Eh bien?" she said lightly.

"Oh, you are beautiful!" he said, almost as if he could not help uttering the words, "you are the most beautiful woman in Rome. I want you to meet my mother."

Surely there would be no more talk then of Grace Widnesses!

"I shall be delighted to meet your mother," she said in a tone of cold conventionality, paying no heed to his outburst.

It was the cool calmness of her that piqued him. He thought he understood the Anglo-Saxon character, but there was something about Mrs. Driscoll that baffled him.

Dinner was nearly over. The coffee and cigarettes had just been brought in. They were alone, and Gillian sat there, leaning one elbow on the table,

while Giacomo gazed at her from the opposite end of the little square table as fixedly as he dared.

"I have not told her about you yet," he said, lighting a cigarette.

"No?" said Gillian, "but there isn't much to tell, is there?"

It was as if she were quietly informing him that he knew so very little about her, that he could indeed answer none of those pertinent questions the mother of an only son would inevitably ask.

"But I want her to know you well. I wish my mother to receive you *dans l'intimité*."

"Is that necessary?" she asked.

"From my point of view," he said.

Giacomo had strayed many times upon the alluring confines of matrimony, but he had always hesitated before taking the final plunge. There had been moments last winter when he had almost resolved to make his mother and Mrs. Widness, and incidentally Grace, happy by announcing his intention of marrying this richly dowered young girl. Mrs. Widness, perceiving in him a tendency to regrettable and undue procrastination, removed her daughter to Naples for a couple of months in order to see what effect absence would produce upon his volatile mind. Then she heard rumours of the presence of Patience Ferrard in Rome and she decided to return. All had gone well and smoothly until the sudden appearance upon the scene of Mrs. Driscoll. Giacomo had scarcely made any pretence of disguising the furious interest that lady had evoked in him.

Possessing all the Italian's cold prudence and sense of calculation, Giacomo was able to combine ardour with a sheer business-like instinct for getting his due. He wanted, of course, to know much

more about Gillian first; at the same time he wanted her to realise he was so far sincere and in earnest, that he wished to present her to his mother, who would doubtless draw her own conclusions.

She rose and led the way back to the *salotto*. Giacomo walked about the room, examining the pictures and china; he knew a good deal about such things. He admired the arrangement of the room, its quiet and subdued colouring. But he could not long keep to purely impersonal subjects. Every moment found him falling yet more deeply in love with Mrs. Driscoll. He had known her just two days, but he told himself that he had fallen in love with her at first sight, that he had been waiting for her all his life, and that Providence most mercifully had saved him hitherto from marriage.

"Mrs. Driscoll," he said.

He walked abruptly over to her chair as he spoke, and stooping down took her hand in his and raised it to his lips. She felt that he was trembling.

"I love you," he said, "I wish to marry you. It is as my future *fiancée* that I wish to present you to my mother."

It was almost a relief to get the words spoken, to be able to watch, as he was doing now, the soft colour darken her cheek.

"You may be perfectly sure of one thing," said Gillian, "I shall never be your *fiancée*."

Even now she could hardly believe that he was really in earnest.

He turned paler. "Are you not free?" he stammered.

"My freedom has nothing to do with it. I don't wish to marry," she said.

"Were you—were you so very unhappy?" he ventured timidly.

"I was not always happy or unhappy. I can make the best of things."

She did not quite know why she fenced thus with Giacomo della Meldola. His subtlety, perhaps, evoked subtlety. He was young, clever, ardent; he held the situation in his hands; there was something masterful and dominating about him. She had used her power just a little; she had consciously encouraged him, but she felt all the time that he was dominating her. Paul had approached her humbly as a slave, this man neither beseeched nor entreated; he simply asserted.

As she sat there Gillian began in the brief pause that followed her own speech to revolve the matter rapidly in her mind. She was certainly not in love with Giacomo, though she felt his attraction; she felt proud to think he had been so swift to offer her his love. She was certain that never again would she fall in love as she had fallen in love with Aylmer Driscoll. The mingled distress and agony and rapture of love could never again be hers; it seemed to her a thing that belonged exclusively to youth; it was something at which age and experience rightly mocked. Her heart was cold. She did not count that momentary tenderness she had felt for Paul; it had been a pitying half-maternal feeling. But she did intend—coldly and deliberately intend—to extract something definite and durable from life. She was resolved that she would not be cheated; she would secure at all costs material happiness. Whether Giacomo could give her precisely what she desired she could not yet tell. It was her ignorance of him that forced her to temporise. She did not want to make a second mistake. But there was something about him that inspired trust and confidence. He loved her, and she felt that at a word

she could fan his love to flame. He had great possessions, and was prepared to lay them at her feet. He could give her a new life in agreeable and beautiful surroundings—so different indeed from the old one that it would be actually incapable of challenging comparison with it. A dignified life, far removed from England and Aylmer and all the torturing memories of the past. She remembered all that Mrs. Widness had told her of Giacomo's upbringing in strict and pious surroundings. That it influenced and still held him was shown in what he had said about his mother.

"If you were my wife," he said at last, in a voice that was low and soft like music, "I would spend my life in trying to make you happy. I would teach you to forget all that you have ever known of unhappiness."

In imagination she was bending alone above the cot of her dead child in a darkened London room. That, at least, no later love could ever teach her to forget. . . .

"Oh, but I don't want to forget everything," she said, almost pitifully; "almost always when one has a great sorrow it means that a great joy has gone before."

"And this," he said, "was so with you?"

"Yes," said Gillian, almost unwillingly.

There was a little table between them; he stretched his arm across it and touched her hand.

"I am sorry," he said. "Won't you tell me about it, Mrs. Driscoll?"

His very soul seemed to be looking at her out of his dark eyes; she felt almost hypnotised.

"Yes—I don't mind telling you if you really care to hear about it. I had a baby girl once. When she was a few months old she died."

He drew in his breath sharply. That grief in

her eyes, which he thought sometimes was the most poignant thing he had ever seen, had not been caused by the loss of her husband. Perhaps she had never loved him. She was very young, and girls made mistakes.

"I would not ask you to forget that," said Giacomo softly.

She was roused to an amazing consciousness of indiscretion. Why had she lent herself to this intimately personal conversation with a stranger who was almost unknown to her? She was a reserved woman normally; that grief was sacred and she never mentioned it. Yet he had dragged her from her frozen reserve; he was thawing the ice that seemed to encase her heart.

"Some day you will tell me more—much more," he said gently.

But this time when he leaned forward and touched her hand he raised it to his lips. The caress made Gillian shiver a little. She sat there very still, very silent, wondering what he would say next.

"One day you will tell my mother," he said, "all about the darling child you have lost. She will be very sympathetic—she will console you. I am sure she will tell you that it is numbered . . . for ever . . . among the Holy Innocents."

He spoke very simply, very sincerely, and his words touched Gillian in spite of herself. She began to realise the simplicity and profundity of Giacomo's faith, and she could see that he was held by it as if by a chain. No doubt his mother was a bigot, but at least she had given to her son something that was of perdurable worth. There had been something beautifully soft and tender in his voice as he had said those words: "*I am sure she will tell you that it is numbered for ever among the Holy Innocents.*"

She wished she had had that thought at the time to comfort her.

"I should like to know your mother," she said. "I never knew mine. It must be wonderful to have a mother to whom you are everything in the world."

"Yes," he agreed, "it is wonderful. She loves me above everything else in the world. Yet she is like St. Philip Neri's mother who said she would rather see her son dead than that he should commit one mortal sin."

A little cold shudder ran involuntarily through Gillian. The words "one mortal sin" struck chill to her heart. It seemed to bring home to her the measure of Aylmer's offence. What would Marchesa della Meldola think of such a thing? Would she not be horrified to find in Gillian a deserted, abandoned wife? What views would she hold in her stern bigotry about the re-marriage of divorced persons, even of that one often so curiously termed the innocent party?

"I think I should be afraid of her," said Gillian, "she sounds severe—even hard. I can't imagine a woman saying or thinking such a dreadful thing about her own child."

"Oh, you would not find her really severe," he assured her, rather surprised at the decision in her tone. The strength of her views on the subject had also somewhat astonished him. "Especially," he went on, "to people who are good. She would, of course, like you much better if you were a Catholic and *dévôte*. She would wish you to become a Catholic—she might even insist upon this before she gives her consent."

"Her consent?" Gillian frowned.

"To our marriage," said Giacomo.

"You are going ahead rather quickly," said Mrs. Driscoll. "I have just told you that I do not wish

to marry. Is it possible you did not understand? If I consent to be presented to your mother it is only on condition that you will not repeat any of—of this folly to her. I do not at all wish to meet her as your future *fiancée*. We are mere acquaintances—are we not?—and I should be happy to meet her, because I know you. Under the circumstances it cannot of course matter in the least to her if I am a Catholic or not!”

Giacomo flushed at the sternness of her tone.

“Oh, but I want it to matter very much!” he said.

He felt chilled and hurt. Why had she asked him to come? Why had she allowed him to take her hand and kiss it without any show of protest or remonstrance?

“You know me so little,” she said, “and yet almost from the first you have begun to speak to me of love. I tell you it is out of the question.” She should never have it on her conscience now, she told herself, that she had encouraged him from the outset. Was not this a sufficient snub for any young man? She saw him wince under her words. So already she had power to hurt him.

“I am older than you,” she went on, “and I seem to have a whole lifetime of experience behind me. You are young—you are almost a boy—only a boy would speak as you do in this foolish exaggerated way. But if you wish to marry I advise you to marry some young girl, like Miss Widness, who is rich and a Catholic—in short, everything that the most fastidious mother could approve or desire!”

She smiled ironically at him. Giacomo looked at her through half-closed eyes.

“But I love you,” he said, “and those young girls—Miss Widness and Miss Ferrard—seem to me babyish and insipid. My mother is, however, very much in favour of Miss Widness. She has been

brought up in pious surroundings. She would, in truth, be a little handmaid to my mother in all her works of charity."

"Do you intend then that your wife should occupy herself entirely with good works?" she asked.

"It is good for women to employ their time in this manner," replied Giacomo, a trifle sententiously.

"Wouldn't she find it frightfully dull and—boring?" Gillian had lively recollections of district visiting under the ægis of Miss Letitia in old Bath days. Her idea of good works was slightly limited, but she imagined they were all conducted on the same lines.

"Not—not a girl like Miss Widness," said Giacomo.

"Then I strongly advise you to marry her," said Gillian, "since she fits in so exactly with your mother's ideal."

The sarcasm of the speech did not escape him. He began to fear that his words had given her an alarming if not wholly erroneous impression of his mother.

"Ah, but I have my own ideals," he said softly, and now there was something languorous in his tone, and his eyes rested on her with an expression of almost passionate devotion. "And you correspond to them exactly. You are the woman I have always dreamed of—always waited for. Without being religious and *dévôté* as we understand it, you are very good. The rest would come. You would have my mother's example—she would influence you."

"You would give her a great deal of anxiety and unhappiness," she said, "if you were to suggest to her that you wished to marry a Protestant. Just as I should grieve and offend my two old aunts who brought me up, if I were to tell them I was going to

marry a Catholic. You see we don't think as you do at all. We should always be disagreeing."

Giacomo said quickly, "Oh, no, we should not. And my mother—yes, she might be anxious and unhappy at first. But if you were to become a Catholic that would make everything all right at once!"

And again Miss Letitia's words echoed in her ears, "Remember Elsie Smith." But surely temptation to change her religion had never been put before poor Elsie in so desirable a form!

"I am perfectly certain I should never become a Catholic," said Gillian with great decision. "I find it very difficult to believe in anything at all. Do please let us talk of something else!"

She lit another cigarette, and Giacomo followed her example.

"I will bring my mother to call upon you," he said. "You will permit this?"

"Oh, yes—do bring her," said Gillian carelessly.

She felt a vague curiosity to meet the Marchesa, though she had already made up her mind to dislike her.

"Only remember that you are to tell her nothing of all this," she reminded him.

Giacomo agreed sullenly.

When he rose to go, he held her hand and looked into her eyes—a square steady look that made her eyelids drop hastily.

"I am going to marry you," said Giacomo quietly. "Did I not tell you that Rome would make you prisoner? You shall be my wife—my prisoner. You think we do not know each other sufficiently well yet? Very well—we will wait a little. I will wait a year—two years—but I shall never marry any other woman. I love you, and you think I am only a boy. I am going to show you that I am in earnest."

When he had gone Gillian found herself trembling a little. Something in those last words had convinced her as to the reality and depth of his feeling for her. And was he not able to give her much that she desired to have in the future?

She sat there alone far into the night, renewing the wood fire from time to time. She liked the aromatic fragrance of those burning olive logs. On the whole she was satisfied with the way she had acted that evening. She had conscientiously tried to snub Giacomo, and he had gone away still full of confidence in his ultimate success. No one could ever blame her for undue encouragement of this young man. But when she looked closely into her own heart, after he had gone, she realised that when—if ever—he proposed marriage to her again, she would certainly accept him. The prospect of a complete break with her old life, of starting afresh amid surroundings that were wholly new and unaccustomed, attracted her enormously. Indeed the more she contemplated it the more desirable did it seem as a solution of her problem. She had been miserably treated by her husband, and she was not at all inclined to retire into that twilight position to which Lady Pallant and her aunts desired to consign her. She wished to enjoy life, to forget her old miseries, the nightmare of Aylmer's desertion and of Deborah's perfidy. Gillian, without realising it, was in a very dangerous state of mind. There was something reckless, desperate, almost unscrupulous in her desire to snatch a few sweet fruits from life. Giacomo loved her, she told herself; why should she repudiate that love? Then a little doubt crept into her heart. When he knew her history, when he knew that the English husband was divorced and not dead, would he still love her?

CHAPTER X

THE Marchesa Meldola, though no longer young, was still brisk and active. She had married rather late in life, and her husband had not long survived his second marriage. By this time her stepson Guido was grown up, and she was able to devote herself entirely to the upbringing of Giacomo, who was a beautiful little boy of four years old. It had always been her hope that he might become a priest, perhaps a monk in some religious order. But as the boy advanced in years, he showed no disposition for this career. He was strong, active, ambitious. The years spent at Beaumont—which his mother had also passed in England, where she had many relations—had given him a taste for English ways and sports. He decided to make the army his career and entered a cavalry regiment, rather to his mother's disappointment. She, seeing how strong was his desire, did not, after the first, attempt to thwart him. She had brought him up very strictly, even severely, but she adored him, and Giacomo, whose disposition was sunny and careless, reciprocated her devotion. He gave her almost all the obedience and consideration she exacted. And so far there had never been any real cause for disagreement between them.

Now it had become his passionate desire that she should see and approve of Gillian Driscoll. Of course he knew that he could not expect her entire and immediate approval. To begin with he was almost entirely ignorant of Mrs. Driscoll's history, and something in his sense of honour prompted him to wait and hear it from her own lips rather than to pursue the easier course of making inquiries of

their mutual friends the Ferrards. He only knew Lady Lucy very slightly, and felt a little diffident about seeking her out just now. And she had no idea that his acquaintance with Gillian had made such rapid progress after their first meeting at her own dinner-party. She did not know Mrs. Widness, who thus had learned nothing about Gillian from her.

As far as he could tell at their first interview, Gillian impressed his mother quite favourably. Of course her manner could not be called deferential; she had a great deal of quiet assurance and self-possession that seemed to lead her to treat the older woman as an equal. There was no attempt on her side to make a bid for the Marchesa's favour. She was courteous and smiling and that was all.

The Marchesa was short and rather stout, and was very plainly almost dingily dressed in rusty black. Her grey hair was neatly arranged without any regard to fashion, and her shabby hat and black kid gloves bore signs of honourable usage. Her large fortune was not spent upon her clothes. To the Church and to the poor she was extremely and unvaryingly generous, and she exhibited towards herself the only parsimony of which she was capable. She lived a very retired life, and was absorbed in good works; she saw only her old friends of the "Black" nobility. She knew nothing of that newer world of Rome—the Rome of luxurious hotels, of rich Americans, and of elegant cosmopolitan tourists. She never saw those fashionable pleasure-seekers who were yearly welcomed in other Roman palaces, and perhaps if she had seen them, the vision would have excited her indignant disapproval, and her fears that Giacomo might find among them an alien bride would have increased ten-fold.

She wondered a little why Giacomo wished her

to make the acquaintance of this Englishwoman. Indeed he had some difficulty in keeping to Gillian's conditions, to abstain from informing his mother of his hopes and fears. He could see that the very request had aroused her suspicions. She said nothing, but she thought a great deal more than even Giacomo could have supposed.

She was surprised at Gillian's youth. She was not only young, but she looked young, with her clear flawless pale skin, her dark grey eyes, her soft dark hair. She was slender, almost girlish-looking, and had the indefinable look of race. The Marchesa recognised in her a woman of character, of crystalised views, sympathetic but disillusioned. She had heard the story of the little dead daughter, and her heart ached a little at the forlorn thought. But Gillian was, in her opinion, too young not to be able to make a fresh start, to take up life under new auspices, to become perhaps again a happy wife and mother.

As they drove away after the brief call had been paid, the Marchesa said to her son:

"Your new friend is very pretty. But she looks also very sad. I dare say she was not very happy with her husband."

"I am also of that opinion," said Giacomo.

"How long has he been dead?"

"She did not say. I do not know her well enough to ask her such an intimate question."

The Marchesa had always made up her mind that she would try and like the woman of her son's choice, provided that there was nothing actually against her. She had decided to do this when she saw regretfully that her own choice was not likely to meet with his approval. But there was something about Gillian that had seemed a little strange and alien to her own ideals. It was not that she

was old, but that she looked at life as few women in their early twenties are accustomed to look at it, with a grave, indifferent, disillusioned scrutiny, as if it could not possibly produce any more surprises of sorrow and pain. It was thus she had taken Gillian's measure. Scarcely older than Giacomo, she was yet a hundred years too old for him. And she could not help suspecting that Giacomo was furiously interested in this woman. He was so silent about her; he did not seem to wish to discuss her, yet she had noticed that afternoon that he had hardly taken his eyes off her.

Unknown to his mother, and also, it must be added, unknown to Mrs. Widness, Giacomo fetched Gillian on the following day and took her out to Grottaferrata. They motored over in time for lunch, and he had arranged they should have tea at his villa on the way back. The day was fine, and their swift rushing through the warm sweet air brought a delicately beautiful colour to Gillian's face. She wore a little close-fitting black silk hat, and had tied a scarf of cobwebby back chiffon round it. The dusky setting made a delicious background for her fair skin, and Giacomo noticed it with fervent approval.

The freedom of their intercourse, their expedition, deliberately unchaperoned, lent quite a novel zest to the adventure. Giacomo was in high spirits, and he infected Gillian with something of his own gaiety.

To-day Gillian felt a little reckless. She had not moved from her decision made the other night, that if he again asked her to be his wife she would accept him. She gave little thought in those days to Paul Pallant; she had, after all, made him no promise. She was quite free, except for the trivial chain that still bound her to Aylmer Driscoll. In a few months'

time that link would be completely severed, and Aylmer would probably marry Deborah Venning as soon as possible. Yes, she was free, and she was conscious that Giacomo had much to give her. It might be that marriage with this young Italian would solve the problem of her future more fortunately than she could have dared to hope. He was young, rich, splendidly handsome, and of noble birth. And he loved her. Although she was not in the least in love with him, she was beginning to like him very much. Marriage was not really a greater hazard based upon such commonplace lines. She dreaded love as a thing that could torture, hurt, and kill; a sword with two edges, a weapon placed in the hand of the beloved often to be turned against oneself in a merciless, mortal blow.

She did not mean as yet to tell him about Aylmer. As long as nothing was definitely settled she could keep him in ignorance. To-day she would be happy. She looked furtively at Giacomo. His dark face was vivid, his eyes were flaming; he looked extraordinarily alive.

"It's a beautiful day," he said at last.

"Yes—perfect."

"You must be very happy to-day," he told her.

"I mean to be."

"We shall be together all through this long spring day. Does that please you?"

"Yes—it pleases me." She spoke almost shyly, afraid as yet of giving him any clue to the change that had come over her, any hint of her new defiant resolution.

"Darling!" he said, and for a second his eyes rested upon her. "Ah, what pretty words for lovers you have in English! Darling—sweetheart—they are prettier even than *amatissima* and *carissima*."

Gillian was silent.

"Darling!" he said again, smiling at her.

"No—don't call me that," she said with an effort, "I don't care about it."

"When we are married I shall call you darling all day long!" said Giacomo incorrigibly.

"We shall never be married."

"You mean—you won't marry me?"

She was silent. She felt that to-day he intended to ask her to be his wife, and she wanted to defer the moment as long as possible.

"Don't let us talk about it now," she said hastily.

But her smile as she spoke reassured Giacomo.

Across the grassy plain of the Campagna broken with the grey old arches and desolate tombs, and strewn now with the scarlet flutter of thousands of poppies, they followed the straight white road towards Frascati, with the Alban hills rising before them in beautiful, delicately coloured outlines. Just short of the town they turned to the right and climbed the hill that leads to Grottaferrata. The white dust whirled about them, but Gillian's face and hair were shielded by her veil.

They lunched at Grottaferrata. It was a simple little meal, but they were both hungry and enjoyed it. It consisted of risotto, little slices of veal followed by green peas, and some roast chicken with salad. Fruit and golden-coloured wine completed the repast. Giacomo ordered coffee and they had it under the trees.

"Then for tea we will go back to the Villa Mel-dola at Frascati," he said.

It was there he intended to ask Gillian to be his wife. He had planned it all with care and forethought. Impetuous as he seemed, he liked to make a programme and follow it. And he wanted his own villa to be the venue of his definite proposal of marriage. He wanted to be able to remember it

always as the place where they had plighted their troth.

Gillian said nothing about the proposed visit to the villa; she was not sure if she wished to go there alone with Giacomo to-day. But he seemed to take it quite for granted that she would come. It did not take them very long to visit the old Badia and the principal places of interest in the little hill town. But it was always the wide view of the Campagna with distant Rome and the sea beyond that held Gillian entranced. As the afternoon wore on, Giacomo's gay buoyancy deserted him a little; he became serious, almost moody. Certain scruples reasserted their claim rather strongly. And the fear that he might not ultimately win her began to obsess him. With what definiteness she had said, "We shall never be married." What did she mean? In his new silence he asked himself question after question about that unknown never-mentioned husband.

They were sitting in the loggia at the Villa Mel-dola having their tea when he leaned suddenly forward. Gillian felt instinctively that the crucial moment had come, and woman-like she shrank a little from encountering it.

"Do you know why I wanted to come here to-day?" he asked.

She shook her head. She knew now that she must face the situation. There was no escape—and did she wish to escape? Her heart's uncertainty oppressed her. He took her hands and there was something masterful, almost rough in his touch.

"I love you," he said softly, "I love you, darling Gillian. Will you marry me? Will you be my wife?"

Her heart beat so rapidly that she felt almost suffocated. And now he had come over to her side,

had raised her face to his. She felt the touch of his lips.

She felt helpless as a little child under that fierce caress. They seemed suddenly to have changed places, and she felt as if she were much younger than Giacomo. She put out her hands in feeble protest.

"I can't answer now," she said at last, "you must wait a little. I couldn't marry you—we know each other so little."

"Gillian," he said, "that is no answer at all. Let us be engaged now, and then we can be married—perhaps in the summer."

"Oh, I couldn't be married in the summer," she said impulsively.

The law would only make her free in July. Until then. . . .

"You have come too soon," she said in a low, constrained tone.

"If you prefer to wait till the autumn," he said, looking for the moment genuinely puzzled, "it shall be as you wish. All I ask you now is to promise that you will be my wife. You are *torturing* me, Gillian, by keeping me in this suspense!"

"I couldn't be married sooner than October," said Gillian doubtfully.

There was silence after she had spoken. His grip on her hands relaxed. He even moved away and stood a few yards from her on the terrace looking over the Campagna. His face was set and very pale. Through the break in the ilex grove they could see the sea shimmering in the sunlight that made a path of gold across its silver.

He turned and moved back to her.

"Will you promise to marry me in October, Gillian?" he said.

An appreciable pause followed. Gillian was thinking perhaps more of Paul than of Aylmer. Had not Paul wished to bind her to this very thing? But Paul belonged to the old life from which she longed so ardently, so passionately, to free herself. Paul's claim had become a little pale. She was glad to think she had never made any promise to him. Yet when she left England she had certainly thought that one of these days when her wound had healed a little she would marry Paul. She felt confused and bewildered. Here was a man whom she had known less than a month who wished to marry her, who wanted to bind her to a definite engagement. Still less did she understand her own heart that in unison with her brain was urging her to accept him as her future husband.

"Yes," she said at last, "if you still wish it I will marry you next October. But you must keep my promise to you a secret. You mustn't tell any one."

"I shall tell my mother," said Giacomo; "she is always in my confidence, but she will respect your wishes."

He came then and knelt down near her, enfolding her in his arms. His lips sought hers. Gillian yielded to his embrace. She felt most intensely happy, tranquil, at peace. She felt that he would assuredly teach her to love him.

"Oh, how I love you!" he said at last. He gazed into her eyes. "My beloved—my wife that is to be. When I said the other day that I should come here for my honeymoon, you were the bride I was dreaming of. I was thinking of the days we should spend here together!"

Gillian surrendered herself to the spell of the moment. Giacomo had been perhaps more wise than he knew in bringing her here to surroundings that were in themselves romantic and appealing. As it

was, the exquisite beauty of the scene, the delicious prospect of land and sea outspread before them, mingled in her thoughts with his caressing, passionate words, giving them an unusual and individual significance.

"It will still be lovely here in October," he said, "it will still be summer."

No—to-day she could not tell him the truth. She could not spoil his pleasure, his happiness, by revealing her own past sadness, and the barrier that still reared itself so darkly between them. He evoked in her a curious almost maternal tenderness. She put her arms round his neck and kissed him. The spontaneous embrace touched him. He looked into her eyes.

"Oh," he said, "you must relent, you must take away this hard condition. If you loved me as I love you, you would not wish to wait so many months. We are neither of us children. What is there to wait for? Why, we may not be alive next October!"

Gillian's face was curiously white and obstinate at that moment.

"I am going to keep to that condition nevertheless," she said. "And you are not to torment me about it. You mustn't ask me to change."

He put his face for a moment lightly against hers.

"It shall be as you wish," he said gently, realising that she had some good reason for the request. "But will you not tell me why, *carina*?"

She felt afraid then that he intended to ask her a definite question and insist perhaps upon a straightforward answer. She did not wish to hurt and destroy this beautiful hour, that belonged to love alone, with any harsh statement of unpalatable truths. It came into her mind then as a subtle temptation that she would rather lie to Giacomo than risk

losing his love. What did his love mean to her? Was it of so much more worth than Paul's? Was it something she would die rather than lose? What did it mean then—this new cold fear of losing him? Did it mean that she, too, was beginning to care for him, beginning to love him?

"Don't ask me, please, Giacomo," she said.

It was the first time she had called him by his name. She was unaccustomed to speak Italian, she uttered it slowly, hesitatingly.

"Oh," he said adoringly, "how pretty you make my name sound!"

Another doubt occurred to her.

"You are sure your mother will keep our secret? I shouldn't like the Widnesses or Lady Lucy to get hold of any—gossip."

She was suddenly afraid of Lady Lucy, who had been so shocked at the bare idea of a divorce; she feared that she might make premature disclosures.

"You can trust my mother," said Giacomo proudly. "Her only objection to our marriage will be because you are not a Catholic."

He said it almost timidly, watching her face to see what effect the words had upon her.

"So few Englishwomen are. I can't see that it matters," Gillian said carelessly.

"It matters very much to people who are as pious as my mother. I am sure it has never entered her head that I could marry any one who wasn't a Catholic."

"You said just now that we were neither of us children. Surely you do not intend always to remain such a slave to your mother's narrow prejudices?" she said, almost scornfully.

She was beginning to see that such a mother-in-law might prove an obstacle in the way of that per-

fect happiness in the future which she had begun to desire so passionately.

"But even I do not regard them as narrow prejudices," he retorted. "Of course I would rather my wife were a Catholic!"

There was silence between them then. The sun was dipping over the sea in a round red globe. Some of the warmth had gone out of the air. A little wind blew across the Campagna and stirred in the ilex trees with a sound as of faint sobbing. Gillian rose to her feet.

"Oughtn't we to be going back, Giacomo?"

When she stood thus facing him she seemed almost as tall as he was; her eyes were so little below the level of his own. He needed but to bend his head ever so slightly to stoop and kiss her. He clasped her hands and held them pressed for a moment against his lips.

"How beautiful you are, my Gillian," he said softly.

On the way homeward they spoke little. The wind had dropped, and against the red and gold of the sunset the huge massive broken arches of the aqueduct of Claudius stood in frowning silhouette, gaunt and desolate. The glow touched the poppies to a deeper crimson. There was something romantic in the solitude, the sadness of the Campagna. It was as if they had suddenly plunged from the sunny fragrant Frascati garden into a twilight world of sorrow and apprehension.

He pulled up the car at a lonely place in the road. No other vehicle was in sight; the place looked singularly empty and uninhabited. Far off the blue Sabine hills lay remote and as if asleep. . . .

"You must never change," he said; "I have such a fear of losing you."

She smiled up at him.

"I do not think I shall change," she said softly.

She drew almost instinctively a little nearer to him. He gave her a sense of safety and protection as of something strong that would die to shield her.

"Say 'I love you, Giacomo,' " he said entreatingly.

"Remember you haven't said it yet."

"I love you, Giacomo," said Gillian.

The words rang strangely in her ears. For never had the irrevocable past held her so strongly, so persistently, as it did at that moment when she first confessed her love for Giacomo.

CHAPTER XI

IT was after dinner that evening, sitting in one of the faded old salons of the Meldola palace, that Giacomo informed his mother of his engagement to Mrs. Driscoll.

She showed no surprise; the intelligence seemed to her only the confirmation of the great fear that had possessed her heart ever since she had been to visit Gillian. She had recognised the extraordinary beauty and fascination of the Englishwoman, and in her heart she blamed her and her alone. No doubt she had deliberately aimed to bring this desirable quarry down. . . .

The Marchesa said very little. She listened to Giacomo with attention, but there was neither sympathy nor pleasure in her face. He told her plainly that he loved Gillian—that he had loved her indeed from the first moment they had met—that she returned his love, and that they intended to be married in October.

“Why October?” she inquired, raising her eyebrows.

“She doesn’t wish to be married sooner. I suppose she will have business things to see to.”

“A little delay will not hurt either of you. You can scarcely know anything at all about each other. How long has she been a widow?”

“I really have no idea,” said Giacomo, trying to speak carelessly.

“Who was her husband?”

“She never talks about him. I think she could not have been very happy.”

“You seem to have asked her no questions at all,” said his mother severely. “Before I give my con-

sent I must know much more about her. How long her husband has been dead—who her people are—and so forth. I do not approve of this sudden action of yours. You should have come to me first. She is very pretty, but she is not at all the wife I should have chosen for you. She is English—she knows nothing of our ways, our thoughts. And she is a great deal too old for you.”

“She cannot be more than two years older,” said Giacomo, stifling his indignation.

“She has been married before—she has had and lost a child. She is years older than you are in the deeper experiences of life. And you know that I am not ambitious for you in the way of desiring great wealth. I only wished you to marry some nice young girl of suitable birth who has been carefully brought up and who is a good Catholic.”

A pause followed this speech. Giacomo was engaged in repressing his rising anger.

“You must tell her frankly that before I give my consent you must ask her certain questions. We have a right to know a great deal more about her.”

“She will, I am sure, tell me everything,” said Giacomo, rather uneasily. There was a faint misgiving in his heart which he could not explain. Gilian was very reticent, and she had a habit of eluding questions and inquiries, as if he had no right to put them. But surely now she had given him a right. He had felt that she was always on the alert to check any manifestation of curiosity on his part. Even when she had spoken of her dead child she had been reserved and controlled. It was as if she had deliberately intended to draw aside the veil that shrouded this solitary and poignant episode of her past life, and then as quickly to let it drop back again as if it were a picture too precious to be exposed for more than a brief moment. She had per-

mitted him to know about her child, but she had never mentioned her husband to him, directly or indirectly, and he felt now while seriously reviewing their conversations that all his attempts to discover anything had been cleverly baffled and parried. He recognised Gillian's ability, and sometimes he had felt inclined to resent it. Only when he was with her all resentment quickly vanished. He was deeply, ardently in love with her. . . .

He came over and put his arms round his mother's neck.

"I am sure you will not withhold your consent," he said gently; "when you know her you will love her as much as I do. And you will have heaps of time between now and October to convert her. I am sure she has no prejudices—she is only completely ignorant of the Faith. I want her to be a Catholic almost as much as you do."

The Marchesa relented a little.

"I will try and love her for your sake," she said mollified.

That Gillian had insisted upon delaying their marriage until October was a point that told enormously in her favour. She evidently did not wish to put the final seal on her triumph by rushing Giacomo into an immediate marriage.

"She wishes also that our engagement may be kept strictly secret," he went on; "we are only betrothed unofficially. She doesn't want it talked about. I made her this promise on your behalf as well as on my own."

The Marchesa marvelled a little at this second unusual and strange condition. Like the first, however, it found considerable favour in her eyes. An engagement conducted in the curious English manner of absolute secrecy, though unknown in Italy, could be far more easily broken off. Gillian was

not going to make a public display of her victim. And perhaps it would be possible without divulging the real truth to give Mrs. Widness a hint that for the present Giacomo's affections were otherwise engaged.

Whether Gillian had really sought to ensnare Giacomo the Marchesa could not exactly say, but the evidence so far was all in favour of her having presented the young man with quite unusual opportunities of escape should he grow prematurely tired of the situation. How odd it was that she herself should find it so very difficult to trust Mrs. Driscoll. She had roused within the Marchesa an instinctive maternal impulse to protect her offspring. But she wisely concealed these suspicions from her son. Let him go first and find out what he could. Let him return to her with chapter and verse of all she wished to know concerning his future wife.

When Giacomo left his mother and went up to his own apartment he felt his happiness a little dashed by her attitude. He had been so steeped in the glamour of love and happiness, an enchantment that wrapped him round with soft rose-coloured airs enfolding him tenderly, that he had scarcely stopped to ask himself concerning those matters which were inevitably the objects of his mother's anxious solicitude. Now they had awakened within him an anxiety scarcely less profound than her own. He tried to put them aside, to think only of Gillian, to recall in imagination the touch of her little soft fingers, the kiss she had spontaneously given him. His day had slipped past in a lovely dream. The places they had seen together would be for ever, he believed, hallowed for him by the remembrance of her.

Colder, calmer reflection showed him that he was still very far from either being in possession of, or

of acquiring, the knowledge, exact and particular, which his mother required. Gillian was an orphan, he knew; she had told him that she did not remember her mother, she had been brought up by two old aunts in Bath. He was utterly ignorant about all the circumstances of her first marriage, and also about the extent of her fortune. He believed that she must be rather a rich woman. But again he had the sense that he had been perpetually baffled by Gillian. There had been so many things which he ought to have asked, could indeed have asked after he had elicited that promise from her that she would marry him. Yet he had concerned himself alone with the much more agreeable task of making love to her. She had responded to his love, not very warmly perhaps, and with some hesitation, but at least tenderly and sincerely, and quite sufficiently in any case to assure him that in the future all would be well.

In October. . . . How many months away was that month! . . . He pictured to himself Frascati, and especially the Villa Meldola in October. The *vendemmia* would be over then, with its sweet fragrance of ripened grapes, and the trailing vines would be hung with a trellis of scarlet and golden leaves. There would be yellowing tints on the plane trees and poplars, and scarlet and crimson ones on the maples. And in the early morning there would be down in the Campagna a deep, deep white bank of mist. The Alban hills would emerge as it were from that white dripping sea. There would be a delicious autumn crispness in that early morning air to set the blood tingling. And then the day would become like summer with clear blue skies and hot sunshine, dying at last in a wonderful crimson sunset that would paint with rose-colour the wide brown Campagna and the sea lying beyond. There

would be wet days, too—beautiful also in their austerity—when wild winds would lash the hills with fierce storms of rain, and he and Gillian would seek refuge within the walls of the Villa in rooms made cosy and cheerful with great wood fires. And when the storm passed they would wander again in the grave ilex-shadowed gardens, drinking intoxicating draughts of happiness.

Yet—why had she insisted upon this secrecy? He wanted to tell every one of his new happiness! Why had she laid down, too, this hard condition of delay? Silence and delay. . . . There was nothing of the shy novice in Gillian. She had a will of her own, and Giacomo had been compelled to submit to it with indeed scarcely a protest. He had clearly seen that if he were to win her at all it must be exclusively upon her own terms. Submission was necessary, and he had yielded at least with outward willingness. The thought hurt his pride a little. If she had been a young girl, all future plans would have been simply discussed with her parents, and she would have had no say in the matter at all; she would have had less to do with the arrangements than any one. But Gillian had dictated her conditions with a little air of definite assurance, with a careless pride that wounded him while it evoked his admiration. And with it all he now recognised that there had been a baffling silence and reserve which had actually seemed to forbid him at his peril to ask questions.

He himself was so much in love that he would have married Gillian without any further definite knowledge, except just what was required to satisfy his own mind and the ecclesiastical authorities that it could be done legally and without flaw. The Council of Trent had laid down certain arbitrary conditions concerning marriage;—had any one any

right to demand more than that these should be rigorously complied with?

It was at this point that Marchesa Meldola was summoned suddenly to Ancona, to the bedside of an old cousin who was said to be dying. She was obliged to leave Rome on the very day following Giacomo's announcement of his engagement to Mrs. Driscoll. If anything, her absence at that juncture was a matter of relief to the young man. He could forgo for the time being the task of questioning Gillian. His mother would not be there expecting daily to be informed of those particulars she considered essential before she gave her consent. He could come back home in the evening without fearing to encounter her inquiries. So he put off from day to day the task which hourly grew more difficult and more repugnant to him.

Rome was being rapidly deserted by the *forestieri*. May was now in the last week of her radiant beauty. Surely, Giacomo thought, he could never remember such a perfect May—such days of ravishing sunshine and beauty. The Widnesses had gone to Genoa to see some friends who had just arrived there from New York, and the date of their return to Rome had not been decided. Lady Lucy Ferrard, seeing that the game was up when Grace Widness reappeared on the scene, had taken the disappointed Patience to the fresh woods and pastures new of Florence. The later development which coupled Giacomo's name ever so slightly with that of Mrs. Driscoll had not reached her ears. She explained her departure by saying that Patience was anæmic and found the climate of Rome too enervating.

Gillian deferred from day to day the enlightenment of Giacomo. No one knew of the long hours

they spent in each other's company. Day after day he fetched her in the car, a fairy coach which seemed to transport them both into realms of serene and tranquil happiness apart from the whole world. They explored together all the old-world towns that cling like jewels to the crests and spurs of the Castelli Romani; they wandered by their blue lakes, and in their cool shadowy woods. If their youth and beauty attracted attention no one knew who they were; they had scarcely ever encountered friends or acquaintances in those enchanted expeditions. Gillian was happy, even very happy, but she felt always that not very far off, Atropos was standing, grimly waiting with her shears. There must inevitably come a day when she would have to tell Giacomo that she was not a widow, that the tie that bound her to her husband was not yet dissolved. Of course it would make no difference to him, to his love for her, which seemed to deepen daily—but it might cause all sorts of other difficulties and prevent the Marchesa from giving her consent. There were rocks ahead. Gillian, knowing nothing of the Catholic religion and its very strict laws about the sacrament of marriage, was quite unaware of the formidable nature of those rocks.

Each unknown to the other was bent upon evading for the present the same difficult task. Gillian began to wish she had told Giacomo much earlier, so that he might have known the worst before his definite proposal of marriage. But almost from the beginning she had been actuated by that passionate desire, almost unscrupulous in its intensity, to drink deep and unalloyed draughts of her present happiness. If she did not actually love Giacomo at the beginning, she loved the love that he gave her. She was proud of it. It made her violently happy; it lulled her pain and robbed the failure of her first

marriage of much of its sting and bitterness. Giacomo had restored her pride and self-respect. She was so grateful to him that gratitude soon found its expression in love. After two years of neglect she found it agreeable to be adored as he adored her. And thus it became from day to day harder for her to speak and tell him the truth. She could not now envisage that scene when his enlightenment would have to be accomplished. There was a grave element of risk in it. She had realised long ago that there was a fundamental and integral hardness and prudence lying behind all Giacomo's surface frivolity. She would find herself at grips with forces whose strength she could not measure—unknown inherited spiritual forces that held him, influenced him, dominated him.

Gillian was aware that she had not acted with the frankness that had been Giacomo's simple due and right when first they became engaged. It could not be said, however, that she had any intention of deceiving him permanently. Lightly entering upon the adventure, she had not foreseen that it would presently engulf her. She awoke one day to find that her brain guided her no more; her very heart had turned traitor. She loved Giacomo with a love beside which her girlish love for Aylmer had become a pale thing of no consequence, and one that also seemed in retrospect wholly incomprehensible. This new and fierce love kept her silent and afraid. She feared to lose Giacomo. She put off the evil day. . . .

They were sitting one beautiful evening in early June on the terrace at the Villa Meldola. The roses were in their full beauty, the creamy old walls of the house seemed to drip with blossom, crimson and golden. A pomegranate tree in the orchard below was aglow with fiery red bloom. It was very still,

very warm. Far off Rome lay in the plain, a golden city in the evening light. All the wide Campagna, too, lay steeped in that golden haze which transfigured everything.

"Are you happy?" he said at last.

Her hand slipped into his.

"So very happy, Giacomo."

"Happier than ever before?"

Something of that quiet joyousness of hers seemed to fade out of her face. He knew that look—any allusion to past days had the power to summon it and to intensify the sadness of her eyes.

"I feel now as if I had never been happy—in the old days," she answered.

"You have never told me anything of those days," he reminded her. "At least hardly anything."

"I do not care to speak of it. But some day I will tell you all about it. Not to-day."

She had trembled then upon the brink of confession. But a wish not to spoil that perfect evening prevented her from speaking.

Giacomo's heart beat a little quickly. For the first time a real and definite fear possessed him as to the nature of that communication. He had had many misgivings before, but he had never felt as he did now that it might be something which could actually hurt and destroy their happiness.

"Don't tell me now," he said quietly, "let us talk only of happy things this evening."

He bent down and kissed her. When he looked at her again there were tears in her eyes. "I want to know everything, of course," he said presently; "you know I am sometimes jealous of those past days."

She said in a strained hoarse tone: "You need not be jealous. There is only one memory of it all that I wish to keep. You know what that is."

"You cannot tell me anything that would alter my love for you," he said, "I love you too much. I am afraid of those months that lie ahead of us—afraid of their power to take you away from me."

She said slowly, "If we are ever to be separated it will be by your wish, not by mine."

"You are very safe in my hands," he answered gravely.

"If your mother withheld her consent in the end would you still marry me?" she asked, almost timidly.

"My mother would never do anything so cruel. You need not be afraid of that."

"But if she did?"

"She wouldn't, unless of course there were a grave reason!"

"And if there were—what she considered—a grave reason? . . ."

"Darling, these are idle questions. My mother has this power over me, that she can spend her money as she chooses. If she disapproved she might refuse to give me any. I have very little of my own."

"Oh, it wouldn't be a question of money," said Gillian, rather relieved. "I have plenty for us both. I mean—we shouldn't be very rich, but we could live here very comfortably on my money. In that sense we should be perfectly independent of your mother."

"Oh, but that would make me dependent on you, wouldn't it?" said Giacomo. "I'm not sure that I should like that!"

"But you wouldn't let it be an obstacle?"

"My dearest—we are discussing a very idle question. You are pre-supposing that there is a grave reason which might make my mother refuse her con-

sent and refuse, too, to give me any money. How can there be such a reason?"

Again the confession trembled on her lips. But with a swift illuminating recognition she understood that Giacomo had parried her question; he would not tell her how far he should consider himself bound by filial duty in the question of their marriage.

"And there is not—there could never be any grave reason," he persisted, almost as if he were saying the words to convince himself of their truth. "I mean a serious reason that could separate us ultimately."

This time Gillian did not answer him. Her eyes were fixed with a dreamy intensity upon the lovely scene outspread before her. The beauty of the evening held her spellbound. She tried to suppress that cold fear that was laying its icy fingers upon her heart . . . the fear that only love can awaken, that is only associated with the thought of losing the beloved. And in the grip of this fear she drove back that evening to Rome with Giacomo, scarcely speaking a word. It had come so close, it had seemed to touch her.

"Are you tired? You are looking so white," he said, with a tender solicitude, as he helped her to descend in the Via Sistina.

"Yes—I am tired," she said.

"You have had too long a day," he said quietly, "you must have a good rest."

"Yes. Don't come and see me this evening, Giacomo—I think I want to be alone."

His bright face showed disappointment.

"Very well. I will come round to-morrow and see if you would care to go out."

She stood watching him as he got into the car and drove away.

CHAPTER XII

LADY LUCY FERRARD was unconsciously the God in the Machine. She had no idea of the progress of events, for she had seen very little more of Gillian while she remained in Rome. But while in Florence she met Mrs. Widness for the first time, when dining at the villa of a mutual friend, and some chance words from this lady gave her the clue to what was passing.

Mr. Widness and Grace were also present. They had stopped a few days in Florence on their return journey to Rome. Their future plans were a little vague, and they felt that if Giacomo were really going to marry this attractive English widow to whom his mother admitted he was showing a good deal of attention, it might be prudent to take a trip over to the States and give Grace an opportunity of forgetting him.

"We've often heard of you through the Meldolas," she said, "so I'm really very pleased indeed to make your acquaintance, Lady Lucy. The Marchesa is such a very old friend of ours and I have sometimes met your charming elder daughter, Marchesa Guido, at her house. Such a sweet pretty creature."

Lady Lucy smiled and made a conventional reply.

She carried the war then, if not into the enemy's country, at least to his boundaries.

"I hope it is true then," she said, "that your daughter is about to be engaged to the younger Meldola. We heard something of it before we left Rome!"

Mrs. Widness coloured slightly.

"I'm very sorry if there's been any gossip of that

kind, Lady Lucy," she said, with a glance at Grace, who was talking to Patience Ferrard at the other end of the room. "There's just no truth in it at all. The young people were great friends—nothing more. And Giacomo is very much taken up now with a charming young English widow who came to Rome in the spring—Mrs. Driscoll."

Lady Lucy was surprised into an immediate statement of the truth.

"Oh, but Mrs. Driscoll isn't a widow," she said, with a look of extreme astonishment. "I've known her ever since she was a girl. She had a very bad husband, and she was obliged to divorce him just before she came abroad. The whole thing's been a great shock to her."

"Do you mean she's got a husband living?" inquired Mrs. Widness.

"Oh yes. Aylmer Driscoll is still a comparatively young man. It is a miserable position for poor dear Gillian."

"Then if that's true, Giacomo can't possibly marry her," said Mrs. Widness with conviction.

"Of course he can't. I suppose he knows her story and is sorry for her."

Now Marchesa Meldola, without divulging the actual truth about her son's engagement to Mrs. Driscoll, had thought it only kind to give Mrs. Widness a hint that his affections were at least temporarily engaged. Mrs. Widness knew that the object of his affections could only be Gillian Driscoll. Rumours had reached her ears that they had been constantly seen together. But this information gave a perfectly different aspect to the situation. The young man must either be in total ignorance of Mrs. Driscoll's history, or he must have deceived his mother on the subject. A feeling of indignation against Gillian surged into Mrs. Wid-

ness's heart. This woman must have deliberately plotted and planned the overthrowal of Grace's happiness. She had herself spoken to her quite frankly upon the subject of Grace and Giacomo on the day of their first meeting at Frascati.

"It's quite impossible," continued Lady Lucy charitably, "that he could have been showing her serious attention. But a young and pretty woman who has been badly treated by her husband can always command unlimited sympathy from men!"

"I think there was more than sympathy on Giacomo's part," said Mrs. Widness dryly; "she lunched with us all at Frascati at the very beginning of their acquaintance, and even then he could hardly take his eyes off her."

It had been a day of petty humiliation for Grace, who had ended it by a violent fit of hysterical crying. She was still looking wretchedly ill and thin, for she had taken the dispossession greatly to heart.

"I introduced them to each other," said Lady Lucy; "they both dined with us one evening when Guido and Imogen were there. But I didn't care for Patience to see too much of Gillian under the circumstances. With a young girl I felt I could not be too careful!"

She glanced across the room at that meek fair head.

The result of this interview between the two ladies, who had both felt themselves to have been in some sense vicariously defrauded, was that they each wrote a letter forthwith to the Marchesa Meldola.

The first to reach her, forwarded to Ancona from Rome, was Lady Lucy's, and it ran as follows:—

"When I introduced Giacomo to Mrs. Aylmer Driscoll in Rome I did not imagine that the acquaintance would go any further, so I omitted to tell him her history, which is really a very sad one. I have

since heard that they have become great friends, and so I think I ought to write and tell you that she has quite recently divorced her husband, who treated her very badly. No doubt they were most unsuited to each other, and one must not judge poets quite like other men—one has only to remember Shelley! I am sure Giacomo by this time is acquainted with her history, but perhaps you could give him a hint that his attentions are at least exciting comment. I hope you will not blame me for having brought them together, but I hear they met each other afterwards at Mrs. Homer Widness's, and she, knowing nothing of Mrs. Driscoll, imagined from something you said that they were now engaged."

Mrs. Widness's letter written a little later was much to the same effect, it only confirmed the ill news by giving scrupulously all the details which she had been able to glean from Lady Lucy. But in addition she did also somewhat maliciously introduce a few comments of her own upon the kind of woman she held Gillian Driscoll to be, and how from the first she had undoubtedly laid herself out to captivate and subjugate the Marchesa's cherished young son, adding a hope that she had not really deceived him about her actual position.

When the Marchesa Meldola received Lady Lucy's letter, her maternal feelings may better be imagined than described. She had the hot temper of her race, and though she had cultivated a rigid self-control it was still apt on occasion to assert itself. Her present rage against her son was an emotion she had never, however, felt before, and perhaps it was fortunate for Giacomo that he was in Rome, and that before a meeting could be accomplished her anger would have had time to cool a little.

So this was the woman he had desired to present

to her as a daughter-in-law! A woman who had divorced her husband and was posing as a bereaved widow! She was nothing less than an adventuress, rendered doubly dangerous by her youth and beauty. The Marchesa told herself that she had always felt there was something wrong from the very beginning. But that there should be a husband still alive had never entered her head. Her worst fears had pictured an irregular union in the past.

No one witnessed her ebullition of wrath, which was first directed against Gillian and then against Giacomo. The self-discipline of years triumphed, and she soon had herself well in hand. But though outwardly calm her thoughts of her son were angry and full of resentment. He had wilfully deceived her, and it did not at first occur to her that he himself had perhaps been deceived. He had spoken and written much to her of the beauty and charm and goodness of Gillian, whereas he must have known all the time that she was a married woman who had divorced her husband. Her first action was to send him a telegram. "*Come at once. Most urgent,*" ran the message.

It was waiting for him that evening after he had parted from Gillian on their return from Frascati, and he made rapid preparations to set out by the night train. He scribbled a line to Gillian saying he hoped to be back on the following evening; there was no time to go and see her. He wondered a little what his mother could possibly want him for, but it never once occurred to him that it was in any way connected with Gillian.

Gillian sat alone in her *salotto*. The day had been very hot and she had not ventured out of doors. She had made up her mind when the evening coolness had set in that she would drive up to the Pincio

and get a little fresh air. She felt unusually exhausted. She was also beginning to feel extremely anxious, and anxiety made her restless and preoccupied. She tried to read, but could not settle to anything. It was now three days since Giacomo had gone to his mother at Ancona, and she had had no word from him. His silence and absence were pressing very heavily upon her.

When it was time to start she went into her room and put on a dress of thin white muslin made very simply, with a blouse that was cut open at the throat, and a broad-brimmed white hat adorned with wings. The white hat made her look too pale, it was almost unbecoming she thought, but she did not change it for another. Giacomo was not there to see her, and nothing else mattered. She hired a *carrozza* and drove up to the Pincio.

Crowds of people had assembled there, and the band was playing under the ilex trees. The flower beds were still gay, and the clumps of oleander were aflame with fiery blossom. Women in their light summer costumes, officers and soldiers in uniform, priests in shabby black soutanes, groups of students from the various colleges, and white-clad children running hither and thither, all contributed their individual note to a scene that was always varied and interesting.

Gillian did not wish to stop to listen to the music; she told the cabman to drive on. She had not visited more than once or twice this typically Roman scene; hitherto her days had been fully occupied with Giacomo. She was beginning to miss him, and to feel a vague uneasiness about his absence. She had not slept well last night, and her eyes were still heavy and sore. She missed the excitement that had lent such flavour to the days of her engagement. Everything seemed a little flat without Giacomo. She wished that he had written to her to explain his

absence. It was his silence that was so incomprehensible. Yet conscience warned her that he might be in possession of only too good a reason for remaining both absent and silent.

She had shut down the book of the past, definitely and resolutely. She would never again suffer herself to be enslaved by its sordid horror. She would think only of the future that promised to be so bright. But to-day the thought of the past obtruded itself against her will. Had Giacomo slipped away from her? She, the once deserted, felt apprehensive of a fresh abandonment. Was Giacomo already wearying of her—even as Aylmer had wearied of her? It was the fate of some women that they could evoke love but never fidelity.

She began to reproach herself. She felt a little feeling of shame that she had so readily responded to Giacomo's words of love. The long hours she had spent alone with him rose before her now like a procession of accusers. Had she made herself too "cheap"? The thought was hateful to her pride. She had had one lesson, and she had failed to learn it; had failed to permit that sorry experience to serve as an equipment against future ones of a like kind. "I must be a very stupid woman," she thought to herself.

She made up her mind to be very cold and distant to Giacomo when he returned. She would show him that she was indifferent. She threw back her head a little. They were passing along the broad white road that leads to the Borghese Gardens with its twin avenues of oleanders now in their full beauty. Blossoms of shining silver-whiteness, of rose-pink, of deep crimson, made blots of exquisite colour. The cabman drove slowly as if he guessed that she would wish to let her eyes rest a little upon their bright loveliness.

Suddenly she saw three figures walking towards

her on the path at the side of the road. They were Mr. and Mrs. Homer Widness and Grace. She felt quite sure that they had seen her, but they passed her without recognition, with eyes fixed as if by mutual agreement steadily in front of them.

At any other time Gillian would not have given two thoughts to the encounter, but she was in a mood that fears affronts, that sees in unseeing eyes a subtle covered insult. She felt quite certain that these people had deliberately cut her. For the moment she felt hot all over. Her heart beat violently; the tears came into her eyes. What did it mean? Then pride came to her rescue. Even if these Americans did cut her, what did it signify? Their friendship was nothing to her. She would not have cared at all, she told herself, if only Giacomo had not gone away three days ago and offered no sign.

She told the man to drive back to the Via Sistina. Rome was hot, dusty, and disagreeable, she thought; the trams in the Piazza del Popolo annoyed her as she passed through with their scraping and their bell-ringing. All the beauty had died out of the day. . . . She was glad to find herself back again in the quiet room. She took off her hat and lay down wearily upon the sofa.

The old problem took possession anew of her thoughts. Where was Giacomo? Why had he stayed away so long without writing to her? Had he so soon wearied of his too facile conquest? His mother had sent for him and he had gone immediately. Why had she sent for him? And why, why had the Widness family cut her dead this evening? Her brain was tormented ceaselessly with these questions.

CHAPTER XIII

GIACOMO read the two letters from Lady Lucy Ferrard and Mrs. Homer Widness. His mother was present, watching him as he read and digested their sinister contents. Her anger had subsided, and she was prepared to act justly towards him and listen to his defence. His face had grown very pale, and little beads of moisture appeared on his brow, just below the rim of dark, smoothly-brushed hair.

Then he laid the sheets of paper down side by side on the table in front of him. He did not speak, but rose and looked out of the window at the distant port and the sea lying fair and blue beyond. There was a long pause.

The Marchesa spoke at last.

"Why did you deceive me about this woman, Giacomo?" she inquired. "You knew that a marriage between you was impossible."

The words forced the truth from his lips.

"I—I never knew it," he said.

His voice was hoarse and strained. He was thinking of Gillian, of her obstinate silence respecting the past, of her continual evasions whenever they distantly approached the subject, of her vague promises to tell him all about it one of these days.

The Marchesa unconsciously breathed a sigh of relief. Of course he was not even now free from blame. No man should ask a woman to marry him without first ascertaining that she were free to do so. But he was not so much to blame as she had at first believed. She could see that the contents of those letters had been a surprise to him—a bitter, unwelcome surprise.

"Do you mean that she deceived you too?" said the Marchesa.

Giacomo hardly heard her words. His thoughts were completely occupied with Gillian. If what the letters said were true, there must necessarily be an end to all things between them. Even in his hour of anguish he realised that. Despite the bewilderment, the confusion into which his own life seemed to have been suddenly thrust, he could at least grasp that salient fact. Under no circumstances could he marry a woman whose husband was still alive. Such a marriage would not count; it would not be a marriage, and he was not the man to submit to social ostracism. He was proud and ambitious and he had an arrogant love for his old name.

"Do you think it is true?" he said at last, turning towards his mother.

His face looked suddenly older. It was a grave, stern face that confronted her; all its youth and gaiety seemed for the time to be completely obliterated. The eyes were dull and sombre, the mouth was grim.

"I do not think you can reasonably doubt what Lady Lucy says. She has known Mrs. Driscoll since she was a girl."

Yes, he could not possibly doubt it, besides, his own heart assured him that it was true. He had always felt the presence between Gillian and himself of some dividing barrier. Even in the moments when he had held her in his arms and kissed her he had been acutely aware of it. He had longed to break down that wall of reserve and he had not dared. Instinct had warned him that he might find something beyond it of such vital consequence that it would be capable of destroying their happiness, of separating them for ever. He had gone on in a fool's paradise; all through their engagement he

had acted the part of a coward. By a thousand significant signs he had been warned that something lay behind that cold reserve of hers.

A violent revulsion followed upon his enlightenment. He was furious with himself for his own crass simplicity, and he was furious with Gillian because she had so easily duped him. He told himself that his love for her was dead. It had been murdered as it were by her own hand. She was not the woman he had supposed her to be. There had been something cold and deliberate about the way she had deceived him. She had never actually lied, but she had given him to understand something that was false. Even in those first moments he vowed to himself that he had ceased to love her, and that he would never see her again. He had permitted himself to be fooled by her.

The Marchesa was intensely relieved to find that her son had been absolutely ignorant of the truth, that he was almost as shocked when he heard it as she herself had been. Her anger against him died down. Of course he had been foolish, almost criminally foolish. But then he was very young, and Gillian was a clever experienced woman, with sufficient beauty and charm and wealth to enslave the fancy of a highly impressionable, imaginative young man. It was the woman who had behaved dishonourably, and the blame was almost wholly hers. But she would be punished as she deserved to be.

"You had better not return to Rome," said his mother; "you always said that you intended to make a voyage to Cyprus this summer. I advise you to get leave and make your plans to start at once. It would be mere weakness to go home—to see her again."

"I must see her and explain."

"I don't think she will require any explanation,"

said the Marchesa dryly; "she will realise by your continued absence that you have discovered the truth. I dare say she will not remain in Rome."

"I must write to her then," he said, in a voice that was hard as well as weary.

"I should prefer it," said his mother, "if you would leave her to me. I will make things quite clear to her. It will be better for you not to approach her at all. She deserves no consideration."

Was his love for her so dead that he had not even now any wish to remonstrate against this harsh decision? He had neither the will nor the words to defend Gillian. He saw that his mother was right. To see Gillian again would be a mistake, would only perhaps revive his feeling for her. At best it could only inflict unnecessary pain upon them both. No useful results could emanate from such a meeting. Eventually he yielded to his mother's suggestion, and promised that he would leave the whole affair in her hands.

"Be kind to her," he said; "you must remember that she has not the same views of marriage as we have. You must simply tell her the truth—that there can be no question of marriage between us. You must explain why. That will be sufficient. Do not blame her nor abuse her for what she has done."

Was it really Gillian of whom he was speaking in this manner? She might have been the veriest stranger. . . .

And after all was she not a stranger? The idol before whom he had so devoutly worshipped was thrown from its proud eminence and lay shattered and crumbled in the dust. She was a woman who had divorced her husband. She had never told him that she was not free. He was envisaging a new Gillian, not the woman he had loved. A suppressed sob broke from him at the thought. Grief and

anger waged a fierce conflict in his heart. He was conscious of but one wish—to carry out his mother's suggestion and put the seas between himself and Mrs. Driscoll. He would not return to Rome; he would run no risk of seeing her. He would start as soon as possible. His things could be sent to him, and from Brindisi he could take ship to Corfu, the first step upon his eastward way. . . .

If the Marchesa intended to punish Gillian she succeeded beyond her wildest dreams. She was not in any hurry to return to Rome and inform her of the progress of events. She accompanied Giacomo to Brindisi and saw him start upon his travels with a satisfaction and relief she could hardly conceal. She had never really expected that he would behave so reasonably. She had believed that he would certainly seek an interview with Gillian and hear the truth from her own lips. But through all the confusion and bewilderment that followed upon his abrupt enlightenment he had felt a definite fear of facing that final scene. He shrank from hearing that last confirmation of the truth, that admission of her own duplicity. He did not want to see Gillian with the veil torn from her face. And he knew that if he did see her, he would have to speak certain truths to her, bitter truths that must necessarily hurt her. He could only go to her with his love lying dead between them—that beautiful murdered love that never could know any resurrection. Even if he were to learn that she had suddenly become free, he could never love her again. He would only be able to see in her the woman who had deceived him, not the woman he had loved so deeply.

For a space of about ten days Gillian waited alone in Rome for a Giacomo who never came. No tidings of him reached her, and she was forced to face

the fact that his absence was a deliberate one. Nor was her own conscience quite easy. She was obliged, too, to envisage the possibility that he had by some means or other learned the truth about her. She had delayed and delayed so long, and now perhaps some one had stepped in and told him.

She was pale and ill with anxiety and suspense. Some days she hardly left her bed, but lay there weeping. She scarcely ever went out of the house; she was afraid of meeting people. Not for all the world could she risk another scene such as that when the Widness family had cut her on the Pincio.

She had tried to write to Giacomo, but in this she had failed. The letter would not be written. It was something before which her very pride rebelled. At the end of the tenth day she began to wonder if this silence were to be eternally her portion, whether he had indeed left her with no intention of explaining his action. In the evening, however, a card was brought to her, and the servant intimated that the Marchesa della Meldola desired to see her.

Gillian felt her limbs tremble. But she knew that the interview must be faced with all the courage she could command. On the whole it was a relief, perhaps, to deal with a woman rather than with Giacomo. In a few minutes the lift brought up a shabby indignant figure.

The Marchesa bowed stiffly as she entered the room. She took no notice of the chair Gillian proffered. She began her attack without preliminary by saying abruptly, "I have come to explain my son's absence. He left yesterday for Corfu and Cyprus. He thought it inadvisable to see you again. He has learnt and I have learnt how you have deceived him by pretending to be a widow!"

"I have never deceived him," Gillian said proudly. "I never told him that I was a widow."

After all she had never uttered a single word that was not strictly true. And if Giacomo had drawn false conclusions, why was she to blame? . . .

"You told him you would marry him. You never told him that you were not free—that you had a husband living."

"I told him I could not marry him until October. But I shall be free next month," said Gillian.

The Marchesa stared at her in amazement. "Free?" she said.

"I have divorced my husband," said Gillian; "the decree will be made absolute in July."

"That does not make you free to marry my son," said the Marchesa.

The words fell upon Gillian's brain like pelting hailstones.

She said pitifully:

"I don't understand. Don't divorced people re-marry here?"

"We have no divorce in Italy. And for a Catholic there is no such thing. A Catholic cannot marry a divorced woman nor one who has a husband living——"

"I am not a divorced woman!" Gillian said, breathing hard.

"You have, however, divorced your husband. You cannot marry a Catholic. It would not be a marriage."

"I—I didn't know," said Gillian.

"You knew enough," said the Marchesa, "to keep your real position a secret from my son. We only learned the truth through a friend. It shocked him as much as it shocked me."

"I thought you would have a feeling against it," said Gillian, "I knew people in England who had.

My aunt, Lady Pallant, for instance. But in England divorced people do re-marry. I only didn't know Catholics couldn't. I thought it was simply a matter of individual opinion. How terrible," and now she looked the elder woman gravely and straightly in the face, "how *terrible* your religion must be!"

The Marchesa said nothing. She returned Gillian's look, but all the condemning severity had gone out of her glance. She felt for the first time a curious sense of compassion for this woman who was so young, so lonely, and so ignorant. She was too charitable not to try and make excuses for her. Only Giacomo—his drawn white face when he first learned the truth—still haunted her. The blow had been for him stupendous, overwhelming.

"Why did Giacomo not come himself?" said Gillian at last.

"He preferred to leave everything in my hands," she answered. "It is not in his power to marry you. I have brought up my son to be a good Catholic. If he were to go through any form of marriage with you, legally valid perhaps in another country, he could no longer practise his religion. It is possible that you did not know—did not understand these things. That does not excuse you, however, for having kept all your past history a secret from him. I may tell you that it made a very bad impression upon him."

Gillian was struggling to keep back her tears. Even now she could hardly realise that it was all at an end—that Giacomo had left Italy without wishing or trying to see her again. She felt stunned at the drastic punishment which was being meted out to her. Surely she had done nothing to deserve treatment so cruel, so inhuman. . . .

"I was afraid that if you knew you would inter-

fere and come between us," she said at last in a low voice. "I was sure of his love, as sure as I could be of anything. But I knew that you had a strong influence over him. I was afraid . . . but I meant to tell him. You may believe me or not as you like, but I meant to tell him before our marriage took place."

"It is a pity you did not tell him at the beginning," said the Marchesa, "it would have saved a great deal of misunderstanding. He would have explained to you at once the impossibility of his marrying you under the circumstances. You would have been spared a great deal of unnecessary pain, and so would my son."

Gillian was crying quietly, stifling her sobs with an heroic effort at self-control. She felt suddenly most horribly alone—more alone even than in those first days of Aylmer's desertion. She felt as if she were travelling across a wide and cold sea in a little rudderless boat that had no other occupant. She was at the mercy of overwhelming waves and storms. There was no help anywhere. She was doubly deserted by husband and lover. The pain in her heart was almost unendurable.

"I suppose you are not staying on in Rome?" continued the Marchesa. "English people almost always find it very trying in summer. Very few stay as late as June!"

"I haven't made any plans," said Gillian.

"I strongly advise you not to remain. There has been a good deal of gossip, and now that the truth is known things may be made very disagreeable for you. A young woman in your position cannot be too careful. I am very sorry for you, but you would be better at home with your friends."

Gillian made no reply; it is possible that the words conveyed but little meaning to her. She was

almost paralysed with this new sense of desolation. All her fairy castles in the air had fallen to the ground and lay in broken formless heaps, irretrievably destroyed. She had planned a beautiful new life that should have no tormenting resemblance to the old. And now she was enduring once more the shamed sense of a door being slammed in her face. How could she ever lift up her head—look the world in the face again? . . .

It seemed to Gillian as if this second blow must thrust her permanently into the dust. How could her pride survive it? Giacomo had left her without a word. He had made no sign of regret, or sorrow at their premature parting. Her actions had "made a bad impression upon him." That was all that survived. Humiliation could go no further. She longed for the Marchesa to go away that she might look at her face in the glass and see if it bore any outward mark of the burning shame that was consuming her, body and soul. . . .

Nor were the Marchesa's views matters of personal prejudice as had been the case with Lady Pallant. They formed part of the system of irrefutable laws which the Church laid down for the guidance of her children. One had no choice but to conform. It was a matter of common obedience. There was no *via media* possible. Giacomo had not been in any way coerced by his mother; he had submitted of his own accord, and had trampled whatever remained of his love for her under foot, as a shameful thing to be spurned and destroyed.

Something lonely and desolate in her aspect suddenly touched the Marchesa's heart. She thought inconsequently of the little baby Mrs. Driscoll had lost. Whatever her fault had been, her married life must have proved singularly and disastrously unhappy. And had she not said that it had never

been her intention ultimately to deceive Giacomo? . . .

"I am very sorry," said the Marchesa. "I am sure that you and my son cared for each other very much." She paused, looking Gillian in the face. Although she was disfigured by her tears, she still looked beautiful and most heartrendingly sad. "I wish you could have our Holy Faith," she said, wondering a little at her own daring, "it would make such a difference to you now. It would help you to bear it and to think of Giacomo without bitterness. You would see then that he could not have acted in any other way. If the laws of the Church are severe and hard, she gives you the means to fortify yourself to fulfil them. We learn her love as well as her severity. She cannot but teach what our Divine Lord taught. We must submit and pray for strength, and pray too for the grace to endure which He is always ready to give. You said just now that you thought our religion terrible. But I shall always pray that you may find your way to that door, which is ever open."

"I shall never do that," said Gillian, choking back a hard dry sob. "You and your Church are very cruel." She seemed to hear Aunt Letty's little chirping voice saying once more, "*Remember Elsie Smith!*" It was a warning that seemed to her now utterly unnecessary. The glimpse she had had of Catholic teaching had been quite sufficient to deter her from any wish for a deeper intimacy. Rather it had excited within her a passionate and fierce hatred. How could men and women submit themselves to such harsh and arbitrary laws—laws which even civil legislation did not attempt to impose? "I shall always *hate* the Catholic Church," she said, and for the first time there was anger in her voice.

"Some day, perhaps," said the Marchesa softly,

"you will not hate it any more." She looked still pityingly at Gillian. Strange to say, she no longer held a bad opinion of her. She was utterly, totally ignorant. The Marchesa had come to curse and remained to bless. She went up to her and took her hand in that shabbily-gloved one of hers.

"God bless you, my dear," she said gently. "I shall pray for you always. Perhaps this hard and painful lesson has been given you for a definite purpose. Do not fight against the teaching and warning it holds."

When Gillian looked up again she was once more alone. The little black figure had slipped away.

"I wish I hadn't cried," she said to herself. "I wish I hadn't shown her that I was hurt! I hated her pitying me!"

She fought now with the sobs that threatened to choke her. The full measure of her grief and loss had become as it were suddenly apparent to her. Giacomo had really gone away; he had sent her no message; everything was utterly at an end between them. He was a Catholic, and for that reason he could not marry her. She was not in his eyes free. And she had loved him; she loved him still. That was the bitterest thought of all. She had set forth so lightly upon the adventure, and Love the God had conquered.

She had been right in her first suspicion that the forces that would be armed against her would be spiritual ones, divine rather than human. Afterwards she found some little comfort in the fact. The Catholic Church was more powerful than she had supposed, it demanded and exacted implicit obedience. Giacomo had not been faithless; rather he had been faithful to an earlier and more exacting claim. Yet she wished he had taken away the sting a little by coming to tell her himself—to assure her

that he was also suffering—that he still loved her, although she could never be his wife. She felt tonight very young, very solitary, very much alone.

Still with a faint wish to please Giacomo's mother, as well as to remove herself from an unpleasant position, she made plans for giving up her apartment, and for leaving Rome as soon as possible.

CHAPTER XIV

SHE went out on the following morning to do a little necessary shopping, and in the Piazza di Spagna on her way to Cook's office she suddenly encountered two ladies. The younger one ran forward eagerly with outstretched hand.

"Why, Jill—what luck!" You're the first friend we've met since we came to Rome."

The rather boisterous but sincere welcome brought a tinge of colour to Mrs. Driscoll's pale face. So grateful was she to Amaryllis Porter that she could have fallen on her neck and kissed her. The friendly words were as balm to her wounded heart and soul.

"Mother," called Miss Porter, "here's Jill Driscoll!"

Mrs. Porter advanced, heated and panting.

"A great pleasure—my dear Jill," she said, gasping between each word."

They moved slowly on across the sunny piazza where the brisk red trams were passing to and fro.

"Ammy and I have just arrived from Sicily. We've only been two days in Rome and we've had enough of it. We're on our way now to buy our tickets at Cook's," said Mrs. Porter.

"We've had a simply topping winter," put in her daughter, seizing Gillian by the arm. "But Rome's really a bit fuggy at this time of year, isn't it? We are going on to Assisi to-morrow."

An idea suddenly occurred to Gillian.

"I'm just going to leave Rome myself," she said. "I took a furnished apartment here and I'm just giving it up."

"Come along with us then to Assisi," said Miss Porter cheerfully, "it 'ud be awful fun. Unless,"

and she looked doubtfully at Gillian, "unless you've made other plans."

"No—I haven't made any plans. I was wondering where I should go," said Mrs. Driscoll, a little sadly.

"Oh, you'd much better come with us, then," said Amaryllis heartily; "we should love to have you, shouldn't we, mother?"

"Of course we should be delighted," said Mrs. Porter; "you two could go about together and do as much sight-seeing as ever you like. Ammy's quite insatiable, my dear Jill, and I can't keep up with her, especially in the heat!"

Here was escape. Few offers could have been more welcome to Gillian at that moment. She had known the Porters years before in Bath and had never lost sight of them. She had always been glad to see them in London. She liked the breezy, wholesome atmosphere of the girl, who was good-natured and unselfish to the last degree.

Amaryllis Porter had a brusque, boyish manner, and looked indeed rather like an overgrown boy with her straight active limbs, her thin muscular arms, her neat brown head and clear blue eyes. She and her mother had never cared for Aylmer Driscoll, nor for those denizens of Upper Bohemia they had encountered in Gillian's London drawing-room. Amaryllis knew vaguely that Gillian had "made a hash of things," and certainly she looked sad and rather ill. But it was not the moment to ask any questions, for by this time they had arrived at Cook's, and Mrs. Porter was already making her desires known.

Before they left the office Gillian had also acquired two tickets for Assisi, and had agreed to accompany the Porters thither on the following day.

She dined with them that night at their hotel,

in some trepidation lest she should encounter any one whom she knew. But one glance round the room sufficed to assure her that all those present were strangers to her. It was a relief not to be alone with her own painful thoughts.

Mrs. Porter was an elderly sedate lady who was perennially shocked at her beloved daughter "Ammy." She had never talked slang herself, and her daughter's speech sounded not only vulgar in her ears, but it was also entirely incomprehensible. As she looked at Gillian she found it in her heart to wish that Ammy would model herself upon Mrs. Driscoll, who was in her opinion almost perfect. Her manners were so quiet and ladylike, her voice was unusually low and soft.

It soon transpired that Ammy had recently become engaged to a young officer whom they had met in Egypt. At dinner she talked about him a great deal, and Gillian felt without any malice that they must be exactly suited to each other.

"He's simply a topping polo player," said Miss Porter; "and at golf he beats me all to fits!" It was her nearest approach to enthusiasm, and signified the highest praise of which she was capable. "I dare say we shall get married in the autumn—he means to put in for leave then. His name? Oh, didn't I tell you? It's the one thing I don't like about him! His name is Hengist Sprot. Rotten, isn't it? At first I wouldn't have him on that account. As if it mattered." She laughed at the remembrance. "He says Amaryllis Porter is awful too!"

She rattled on gaily, while her mother listened with an indulgent and Gillian with an amused smile.

"Did you see Lady Lucy Ferrard in Rome this spring?" inquired Mrs. Porter, when her daughter's flow of conversation had momentarily ceased.

"Yes—I dined with them once. They have gone, I think, to Florence." Gillian spoke in a strained, nervous voice.

"No luck, I suppose?" asked Amaryllis.

"Luck?" repeated Gillian.

"With that young Marchese—the sister's half-brother-in-law, or whatever he is?"

"Dear Ammy, I wish you wouldn't gossip so," said Mrs. Porter, in a mildly reproving tone.

"Well, Mummy—you know what Mrs. Merton told us. She said he trotted about after Patience until an American girl with lots of millions came back to Rome, and then he went after her. And then a young widow—whose name Mrs. Merton couldn't remember—chipped in, and boiled the whole show and cut them both out! No wonder they've gone to hide their diminished heads in Florence! What sucks!" And she leaned back in her chair and laughed loudly.

Gillian's face changed colour.

"Rotten luck, wasn't it?" continued Amaryllis. "If it hadn't been for Hengist I'd have tried to chip in too! I'd have given him a nice lesson for philandering like that. He jolly well deserved it! Did you ever meet him, Jill?"

"Oh, yes—I met him one night at the Ferrards," said Gillian listlessly.

She was glad when Mrs. Porter changed the subject by asking what time their train left for Assisi, and they continued to talk of their journey and to make plans for Gillian to meet them at the station.

On account of their rather early start she excused herself for leaving them soon after dinner. She was desperately afraid that Miss Porter might again revert to the subject of Giacomo. She was beginning to feel ungratefully that a little of Amaryllis's conversation went a long way. And there was her

packing to be done. Her new maid, an Italian woman, required a certain amount of supervision. She was rather glad to find herself at last alone in her own room.

She went first to her locked writing-case and took out a slim packet of letters—all that Giacomo had ever written to her. They were all quite short, mostly making appointments for their next meeting or expedition. The oldest was only about two months old. From the formal "Dear Mrs. Driscoll," they had gradually grown in affection until the last ran simply, "Darling, my mother has telegraphed for me, and I am leaving Rome to-night. It will not be for long, we shall soon meet again, for I hope to be back to-morrow evening. Darling, I love you always, always. GIACOMO."

And now already he did not love her any more. . . .

With a little sob she kissed it before she tore it up. Something of her own heart seemed to lie in those shattered fragments. There was an open fireplace in her room and she made a little heap of the pieces of paper and knelt down to burn them, watching them as they slowly consumed before her eyes. The little action seemed to give a definite finality to the episode which had once seemed so bright and beautiful and romantic. She had lost Giacomo for ever. . . . The remembrance of his mother's words brought a flush of shame to her face. She had been so ready to suppose her an unscrupulous, unprincipled adventuress.

It was a relief to feel that to-morrow she would leave Rome. The sudden advent of the Porters had been quite providential and had relieved her of the hard task of making plans. Amaryllis, with her buoyant spirits and unbridled tongue, could hardly be called an ideal companion, but she was better

than none, and Gillian at this juncture was beginning to find her solitude and loneliness press heavily. She would stay perhaps some time at Assisi and then go on to the mountains—it was all one to her. She would drift until the inclination seized her to return to England. Even the little grey house in Brock Street had once or twice arisen before her mental vision as a desirable shelter and refuge from the storms of life. There, at least, she was sure of a welcome; there at least she belonged. She thought of those words, "Darling, I love you always, always." And already that brief madness was at an end; he did not love her any more. She felt as if she had been struck in the face before a crowd of people who callously witnessed her shame. . . .

She passed a feverish, restless night, and rose early, much earlier than was necessary. She arrived at the station before the Porters, who, however, soon appeared upon the scene. Amaryllis wore the neatest of grey suits, short in the skirt and well-fitting. She always looked her best in severe tailor-mades. A grey hat of the same shade fitted closely upon her light brown hair. She wore a white veil and looked as fresh as a rose.

"Oh, there you are, Jill!" she said, running up to her. "My word, you look a bit off colour!" She gazed at her with real concern.

"Do I?" said Gillian. "I'm sure I don't know why I should."

"I suppose Aylmer's been giving you a rotten time?" inquired Miss Porter.

"I suppose he has. I have divorced him," said Gillian simply.

"Yes—we saw it in the paper some little time ago. I always said Aylmer was a bad egg. I'm glad you had the sense to get rid of him. I don't care for poets myself. Give *me* soldiers!"

She ended with a hearty laugh.

In a sense it was a relief to speak thus frankly to Amaryllis Porter, for she took the normal English views of such proceedings. They were painful, of course, but were sometimes highly necessary and were referred to without much astonishment or disapproval. Miss Porter had summed up the whole matter by saying that Aylmer was a bad egg and that Gillian had done well to get rid of him.

"I dare say you will get married again some day," she observed calmly, reflecting as she spoke that Gillian, though scarcely older than herself, was no longer in her first fresh loveliness of girlhood. She had a worn, rather drawn look this morning; there were shadows round her eyes, and her pretty mouth had a sad but resolute expression. She was very thin, and there was something pathetic about her that seemed to appeal inarticulately for protection.

"Oh, I don't think I shall ever marry," she assured Miss Porter, "I'm not sure one isn't happier alone!"

Their conversation was abruptly terminated by Mrs. Porter, who desired her daughter to see to the inevitable registration of their very extensive luggage. Soon they were all three seated in the train and were steaming slowly past the ugly new suburbs of Rome. To her surprise, however, Miss Porter continued their conversation as if it had never been interrupted.

"You say that now—that you won't marry again, Jill—because you backed a wrong 'un! But just you wait a bit. One forgets things very quickly really. I've known the most broken-hearted widows marry again. And you're too young to be messing about alone. I hope your money's quite safe?"

She felt a keen interest in marriage-settlements,

and was rather proud of the amount she could "bring in" to her own.

"My money is all in trust. No one can touch it," said Gillian.

"A very sensible arrangement," remarked Miss Porter.

Her breeziness acted almost as a tonic to Gillian. It seemed to her as if this frank outlook of hers simplified everything. She felt as if Miss Porter had brought with her a wholesome draught of English air, sweeping away those complicated cobwebs that seemed to have woven their dusky web around her, holding her fast with invisible threads. At any other time she would not perhaps have appreciated the prospect of making this journey with the Porters, now she had deliberately embarked upon it, welcoming it as an escape from an untenable position. She was feeling utterly crushed and nerveless and inclined to lean upon Amaryllis Porter's good-natured strength. Her very vulgarity seemed to possess a kind of vigorous, attractive sanity. Life had of late seemed so extraordinarily difficult and complicated and had made so many demands upon her exhausted endurance that she was thankful to have this simple presence with her.

The bitterness of her separation from Giacomo still obsessed her. If he had really loved her, would he have cast her aside with such callous and deliberate action, such unhesitating cutting of the knot? She was ashamed to think that she loved him, that she was ready with forgiveness even now should he choose to come and demand it. . . . She had never felt like that towards Aylmer. After the first shock she had been only too ready to harden her heart against him and Deborah; her love for them had changed most abruptly into hate. But she could not hate Giacomo, although he had shamed

her to the very dust. His tenderness had awakened within her a new, strange, submissive love. He had come to her so readily, so eagerly; he had softened her pride and healed her wounds. Those hours spent at the Villa Meldola passed continually before her eyes. She saw the golden sunset light on the grey plain of the Campagna and on the polished silver of the sea that lay beyond like a transparent shadow. She saw the great cypresses uplifting their slender dark spires to the sky. She was walking with Giacomo again in the cool shadows of the twilight ilex woods. There was one point at which they were hidden by the trees from any curious observers at the windows, and here he would always stop and lift her face to his and kiss her—and kiss her. . . . Even now she could feel something of the thrill those caresses had evoked; even now her limbs trembled a little at the dear remembrance of it all. He had taught her, alas, the unwelcome lesson that she was still capable of love, that her heart had not grown cold and frozen. Till then she had imagined that life had taken from her all capacity for affection; even Paul's love had left her cold and uncaring. But Giacomo had breathed on those dead ashes of love, and had renewed the fire in them and made them glow. It was impossible to deceive herself on this point, he had taught her to love him, and then he had deliberately abandoned her. She could never be his wife, so he had resolved never to see her again.

As Amaryllis fell into silence Gillian's thoughts turned to Paul. What would Paul say if he knew that she had engaged herself to another man, who in his turn had proved faithless to her? Would his love survive this hard knowledge? He did not hold the strict and harsh views she had found in Italy concerning the marriage of women who had

divorced their husbands. She could still marry Paul if she chose. She felt that his love for her would not quickly change. Was he alone faithful? Aylmer had forsaken her for another woman; Giacomo had failed her on account of religious scruples. What pretext would Paul find when his love for her grew weak? . . .

Through the smiling June landscape the train travelled with a leisurely progress. The gay emerald tints of the acacias and the young corn mingled with the soft grey velvet of the olive orchards. Fields of lupins with their white, fragrant spires of blossom seemed to Gillian to resemble thousands of sleeping butterflies. The vines festooned and garlanded hung from tree to tree like giant necklaces. In the deep furrows a line of scarlet disclosed the thickly growing poppies. Far in the distance the high mountains still showed faint streaks of snow. They passed ancient cities, brown and bleached with age, hanging to the precipitous crests of the hills with campanile and dome outlined against the sky. Rivers jade-coloured flowed at the foot of those hills. At last the Umbrian plain came in sight, and the lovely hill cities clinging like jewels to the slopes shone pearl-white in the sunshine. Lake Trasimeno lay outspread like a magnificent turquoise whose shadows were painted in pure deep violet. Little white villages, clustering at intervals on the lake-side, seemed to be lying asleep in the sun.

At last the train stopped and Gillian found herself standing on the platform at Assisi with the city of St. Francis above her, looking down from its grim eyrie across sloping fields filled with olives and vines. She saw the two fortress-like churches that guard the town, one at each end—the monas-

teries and churches of the two Assisan saints, St. Francis and St. Clare. High above the town, perched on a grassy slope, stood the ancient Rocca, its grim grey shape outlined against the limpid blue sky. Eastward Monte Subasio reared its barren, rugged heights, austere as are all the Umbrian mountains, as if to furnish a sombre setting for the delicate jewel-like cities that cling to their crests and slopes.

As Gillian looked up she said to herself: "I wonder what Assisi will hold for me."

She remembered then with a sudden stab of pain that Rome had held for her Giacomo della Meldola; his splendidly handsome face, his dark eyes, his words of love. Rome had seen the beginning and end of the love affair that had seemed at first to give her back her very youth. And Assisi? . . . Something in its grey austerity almost frightened her. She knew vaguely the outlines of the story of St. Francis. Before her marriage she had attended lectures on Italian Art, and Giotto and Cimabue and Lorenzetti were no mere names to her. The subject had been presented to her from the artistic rather than from the religious standpoint. She knew there were certain things to be seen in Assisi, wonderful frescoes in beautiful old churches renowned through all the world; she knew, too, that St. Francis had been the chief source of inspiration in that religious and artistic revival.

Miss Porter approached her on the platform, turning away for the moment from the pile of luggage which was her principal care.

"I don't suppose any one has heard of golf here!" she said, surveying the scene with good-humoured toleration. "In fact, it would be almost sacrilegious to mention such a thing." She thrust an armful of clubs into the hands of a surprised Italian *facchino*.

"And, of course, no one would dream of trying to lay out links on the side of a wall like that." She laughed, and Gillian could not help laughing too.

"Ammy dear," said her mother patiently, "have you got the luggage ticket?"

"Yes," said Amaryllis, producing it. "I suppose the hotel people will see to it all. We're going up in the auto-bus."

Soon they were whirling along the white, steep, and shadeless road that twists and winds up to the city of St. Francis, scattering dogs and chickens and children in their rapid and dusty progress.

Amaryllis looked up at the city above them.

"Droll little place," she remarked; "I hope we shan't be bored here. I very soon get fed up with looking at musty churches and peeling frescoes. And I don't suppose there's a good shop in the place. I am going straight up the moment we arrive to have a bath!"

CHAPTER XV

GILLIAN was tired that evening and she made an excuse for leaving the Porters early and retiring to her room. She wanted desperately to be alone and she felt a little ungrateful desire to get out of earshot of Amaryllis's incessant chatter.

Beyond her window there was a little terrace, and she went out there to look at the wide, immense, and beautiful view which lay outspread before her. It seemed to her at first so beautiful that it almost took her breath away. The mountains lay wrapped in sombre purple, their shapes were still clearly outlined against the fading crimson of the sky, but the plain was wrapped in shadow, broken only by the slim and luminous path of the Tescio. Here and there both hills and valley were pierced by little clusters of lights, marking the villages of Bastia, Bettona, St. Mary of the Angels, Rivo Torto, and many more. On the crest of the opposite hill a crooked ascending row of lights showed the hill-town of Rocca di Petrignano. And there to the north-west, perched high on a rocky summit, the bright lights of Perugia were distinctly visible and seemed in their brilliance to rival the stars that hung low in the violet sky above them. Darkly silhouetted against the night sky she could see quite close to her the beautiful tower of the Basilica of St. Francis, and the massive buildings of church and monastery seemed to melt into one another in one vast inky blur. A bell from the Campanile rang out the hour. Gillian leaned her elbows on the low balustrade and gazed out into the night that was now dark, but despite its darkness was full of colour and mystery. From the quiet little garden below

the scent of dew-freshened roses stole up to her. Fireflies flitted among the clumps of bamboos and the thick bushes of oleander. She could hear the croaking of innumerable frogs, the shrill, piercing note of the cicala. Something of the enchantment of the place began to steal over her. She felt the touch, almost caressing, of the night wind that stole past like a silent messenger.

"I think Assisi will heal me," she said to herself, "at least it cannot give me fresh wounds."

After the tragic experience of Rome she felt that she only needed tranquillity and eventless days. She shrank from people and society, though she was glad now not to be quite alone. She would go for excursions with the Porters, and the rest of the time she would explore those countless treasures the city possessed, she would learn to know by heart its dim and beautiful churches. And when she was tired she could lie out undisturbed upon her sunny terrace.

For the first week she spent some part of every day in doing what Miss Matty would have called "improving her mind." She read books about Assisi—there were a great many in the hotel library, some bad, some good, but all of them taught her from varying points of view something of the life of the Little Poor Man whose footsteps had once trodden the steep and cobbled streets of Assisi, who had been born there in a humble stable, and who had returned to die in the city he so loved. Gillian learned of his gay youth, his voluntary poverty, his self-abnegation, his consuming zeal for his Master, his tireless work, his many miracles. She seemed to see him treading with bare feet those sunlit streets. Insensibly his history began to preoccupy her. She spent more and more of her time in the dim Lower Church with its sombre walls decorated with the jewel-like frescoes. She heard the friars

chanting their office and the monotonous sound pleased her, it enhanced the atmosphere of the place and intensified its total unworldliness. Tourists passed carelessly in and out, staring perfunctorily at the frescoes without understanding them, and bestowing a casual glance at the ancient glass of the windows. In those hot days of June she found the grey gloom of the church restful and soothing, full of peace and tranquillity. When she left it and went back to the glare of the piazza the sunlight seemed for the moment to blind her; she could hardly distinguish the faces of the beggars who congregated outside the doors.

Part of the charm of the place lay in its power to still her restlessness. Here she missed nothing of the summer weather she had known in Rome, nothing of the radiant heat, the aching gold of the sunshine, the blueness of the skies; and she gained much, almost indeed immeasurably, in the delicate, fragrant coolness of the star-lit nights and the dew-drenched, mist-wreathed early mornings. She learned to love the haunting mystery of those Italian dawns creeping over the mountains, revealing almost as it were reluctantly the details of the scene, gilding a tower here, a dome there, drawing away curtains of mist to disclose the silver greyness of the olive-orchards, the brilliant emerald of the vines hung with pendent bunches of little green grapes. From her terrace she could see the climbing roofs of Assisi in all their delicate blond colouring, grey, mauve and softest pink and palest gold, ascending to the Rocca like pilgrims mounting that happy hill, as one writer has imaginatively described it. Afar she could see Spello hanging on the mountain side like a pale jewel. In those summer days only a thin little trickle of water divided the pale sands of the Tescio's winding bed.

One morning she rose early and went into the church before the tourists had come to disturb that quiet sanctuary. There was a light in the crypt, and she went down the flights of stairs and found a priest saying Mass at the altar by the Saint's tomb. She knelt down in a dark corner and covered her face with her hands. Presently a bell rang sharply. She looked up and saw the Host uplifted. Gillian found herself trembling a little; a curious emotion possessed her. Without comprehending, she bowed her head. All around her were kneeling peasants in attitudes of devotion.

She went back to the hotel when Mass was ended and entered the dining-room. Amaryllis was sitting there having her morning coffee. She was dressed in a light cotton coat and skirt almost dust-coloured with a neat hat of Panama straw.

"I went to your room to look for you, Jill," she remarked, "but you weren't there. Where on earth have you been to so early?"

"I've been in church," said Gillian simply; "it's lovely there in the early morning. I heard Mass in the crypt. What are you going to do, Amaryllis?"

"We're making an early start for the Carceri. Mother's going on a mule, but I shall walk. It takes about an hour and a half, and it's a steep climb. Do you think you can manage it, Jill?" She looked doubtfully at Gillian's pale face and slight, delicate form.

"Oh, I think I can," said Gillian; "I'll go and get ready. What time shall you start?"

"About a quarter to nine if I can get Mum up to the scratch," replied Amaryllis.

It was a beautiful morning. The mist had not yet quite lifted down in the plain, but the surrounding hills were all clearly defined. The Umbrian

landscape, bleak and austere, was softened by all the vivid summer green of vine and wheat. The mountains were painted in soft tones of grey and pale violet. All along the sides of the white steep road blue thistles and scabious of various hues, mauve, white, and pink, thrust up their blossoms above the coarse yellowing grass. Purple campanulas hung out their bells, tall mulleins like pale candles lifted erect spires; wild parsley, brambles, dog-roses and honeysuckle made a feasting place for the bees and a garden for the butterflies that wandered there in drowsy inconsequent flight and settled sleepily upon the flowers; they looked like fragile silken-winged blossoms seeking their earth-sisters. Clouded-yellows, blues of every shade, brown walls and heaths and coppers, fritillaries and gorgeously painted Red Admirals and Peacocks—marvellous creatures too delicate for such clumsy school-boy nomenclature—floated past in the sunshine. Green lizards darted out among the red rocks. Olive trees covered the slopes like wreathing grey clouds.

At a stony bend in the road some trouble was experienced with Mrs. Porter's mule, and in spite of the vociferous assurances of her guide that all was well, she descended precipitately from her mount, and excitedly began to demonstrate her fear of proceeding any further under such perilous conditions.

"Nonsense, Mum!" said Miss Porter good-humouredly, "the beast's as quiet as a lamb. Those donkeys in Egypt were much more dangerous, and you never turned a hair. He only shied at those children—tiresome little nuisances! We can't possibly stop here—we shall be broiled in this hot sun."

Mrs. Porter sat down on the nearest bank and began to fan herself.

"Ammy dear," she said, "it's no use your trying

to persuade me to get on that brute's back again! I can see he's as vicious as ever he can be—you've only got to look at his face! I'd rather walk every inch of the way than get on his back again."

Miss Porter went boldly up to the mule and proceeded to pat and stroke him as if to demonstrate his docility.

"Oh, I dare say he's all right like that," said her mother, "but he did kick just now—I was as nearly as possible over the precipice. I'm surprised, Ammy, that you should *want* your mother to run into such awful danger. The donkeys in Egypt were bad enough, but not one of them ever kicked like that! Besides there were no precipices there!"

Her large, plump, heated face wore an agitated, scared expression.

"Nonsense, Mum," repeated Amaryllis, with an amused smile. "He is as quiet as a mouse really. Wouldn't hurt a fly, would he, then?"

The man stood by smiling. He could guess pretty well what was passing, although his English consisted of only two expressions which he had always found sufficient for all practical purposes, "All right," and "Damn!" These he had learned from the lips of the innumerable British tourists whom he had conducted to the fastnesses of the Carceri.

Quite ten minutes had now elapsed since this exhibition of peevishness on the part of Mrs. Porter, and both Amaryllis and Gillian were beginning to despair of continuing their journey when suddenly round the corner of the hill there appeared the figure of a man—a tall figure in grey flannel suit of very English cut. He came down the road and halted before the little group. Divining that something was amiss, he lifted his straw hat, and addressing Mrs. Porter as the oldest and most responsible member of the party, he said:

"Can I be of any service to you, madam?"

He was fair with brown hair, blue eyes, and a very charming smile. Gillian liked his voice.

"My daughter is trying to persuade me to mount that mule again," explained Mrs. Porter in an aggrieved tone, "but I utterly refuse. He is a very vicious beast, and just now he kicked and very nearly threw me. I should have gone straight over the precipice. I'd rather walk every inch of the way than get on his back again." She repeated the words with greater obstinacy and determination.

Amaryllis smiled upon the stranger, and shrugged her shoulders with a gesture that conveyed to him her own helplessness to deal with an obdurate parent. He was decidedly good-looking in that well-set-up, active British way of his; it was evidently his intention to be friendly and helpful. She wondered why his eyes strayed always back to Gillian, who stood there passively without saying a word.

"Oh, come now," he said, "I'm sure the mule isn't as bad as all that." He spoke some words in fluent Italian to the man, who once more broke forth into voluble explanations accompanied by gesticulations that seemed to include Assisi and Spello and the whole of the Umbrian valley. Gillian, whose knowledge of Italian was still slight, had managed to gather that the mule was unaccustomed to having such a heavy weight as Mrs. Porter upon his back, and had signified his disapproval by a protest that took the form of kicking. She smiled as she realised this, and her eye caught that of the stranger, who suddenly perceived that she had grasped what the man was saying.

Turning to Mrs. Porter, he said, "I'm really going up to the Carceri myself this morning, and if you will allow me to accompany you, I'll promise to keep the mule in order. You shan't come to grief.

It is a longish walk, and it'll be pretty hot before we get there; I really don't think you could manage it on foot. And having come so far, it seems a pity to turn back!"

"I simply can't," said Mrs. Porter. "Ammy, tell him I can't."

She closed her eyes.

"But, Mummy—if he's there to help us!" said Amaryllis persuasively, and with commendable patience.

"He can't possibly prevent the mule from kicking, Ammy."

The tone was, however, less decided, and Mrs. Porter, rising from the bank, stood majestically by her daughter's side.

"I'll walk home," she said, "and you two girls can go on alone with Mr.——." She glanced interrogatively at the stranger, who replied without hesitation:

"Ian Frazer."

"It would be very kind of you to go with them, Mr. Frazer," added Mrs. Porter.

"Do let me entreat you not to give up the expedition," he said; "why, you are more than half-way there—it would be a thousand pities to go back now. I'll answer for the mule!"

He went up to the suspected animal and took hold of the bridle, as if to encourage Mrs. Porter to trust herself once more to its mercies. His eyes met Ammy's. He surveyed her bright, boyish face with its frank eyes and curly hair, then almost involuntarily he glanced back at Gillian.

"I'll walk between you and the edge of the road," he went on; "even if the mule does kick again, which I don't think he will, you won't be in any danger."

Mrs. Porter shuddered a little, then came forward uneasily. She gazed up at the steep white

road, stony, precipitous; the glare from it hurt her eyes.

"Very well," she agreed reluctantly, and after some little further delay and difficulty she was hauled once more upon his back, and the mule proceeded without remonstrance, an apparently docile and repentant animal.

They climbed the hill, Mr. Frazer leading the mule by the bridle and interposing his tall stalwart figure between Mrs. Porter and the dreaded precipice.

Gillian and Amaryllis followed behind.

"He reminds me," said Miss Porter with a little giggle, "of Hengist. He's got the cut of a soldier, but he's better-looking than Hengist really. And what nice blue eyes—did you notice them, Jill?"

Gillian offered some commonplace reply. The little scene had amused her, and the young man had certainly directed more than one glance of humorous sympathy towards her. They pursued their way almost in silence, and Gillian was getting tired long before the grey buildings of the famous hermitage clinging to that steep ravine came into view. She was glad to rest on arrival in the quiet little chapel. Mrs. Porter, also somewhat exhausted, kept her company, while Amaryllis and Mr. Frazer disappeared.

"I can't think how it is, Jill," said Mrs. Porter in the sibilant whisper of one who addresses another in church, "but wherever Ammy goes young men seem to spring out of the ground! I assure you it has often made me very anxious, and I shall be glad when she is safely married to Hengist, and then I shan't be there to see them spring and feel worried about it! Still, he was really very civil and helpful, this Mr. Frazer, wasn't he? And not at all afraid of the mule. In fact, I could see that the

mule was a little afraid of him—he never tried on a single one of his tricks!”

Gillian paid little attention to the rather purposeless and inconsequent conversation of Mrs. Porter. The atmosphere of the place was slowly possessing her; she felt almost as if in some indefinable way it were claiming her. This remote hermitage perched high on the rocky slopes of Monte Subasio was informed with a spirit that was new and strange to her. She did not all at once connect it with that Church which, as she had told the Marchesa with passion, she had learnt to hate—the Church that had separated her so arbitrarily from Giacomo. She knew only that the Carceri was a place where men were content to live, perhaps to die, bound by strict rule, fulfilling hard, monotonous, and often distasteful tasks, day after day, year in, year out, for the love of God. They had laid aside all prosperity and material comfort and fortune; their life was bounded by these narrow walls so that they might pray the better, serve God the better, living very close to Him in their self-imposed solitude. Only the absolute necessities of life were theirs, scant food, rough lodging, coarse attire. What did they receive in exchange?

She asked herself that question now as she knelt in the little rude chapel with her face hidden in her hands. What had it to offer—this service of which she was still so ignorant? More self-sacrifice, more renunciation, undertaken joyfully, nay, eagerly—that was apparent even to her. These men had entered a jealous service that admitted no rival. In her ears she could hear the Marchesa's words, sounding stern but kind: “I shall pray always that you may find your way to that door, which is ever open.” Could it be that love and tenderness awaited her where she had believed only

to find harsher laws? The answer seemed to lie in the figure of Christ hanging upon the Cross, scarred, bleeding, suffering.

Paul and Giacomo passed before her eyes; they had loved her, they had offered her happiness. Even now she could still believe that Paul Pallant was obstinately waiting for her return. . . .

Figures from the past seemed to emerge from their shadows in a kind of dim procession. She saw her aunts and Aylmer—how happy she had been to feel that she need never return to the appalling and narrow dullness of Brock Street!—Lady Pallant and her son and daughter, Deborah Venning with her cold green eyes, then lastly, Giacomo and his mother. In all their lives she had played a part, and now she was outside in the cold, estranged as it were from all their interests. She was kneeling here in the worn, dark chapel trying to pray, with her face hidden and the tears dropping through her fingers. How terrible life was . . . so long . . . so very lonely. Twice she had seen happiness snatched from her; twice she had been repudiated, flung back into the dust. She felt soiled as if she had been really wicked. Yet other women had acted as she had done and no one had blamed them. . . .

She did not notice that Mrs. Porter had quietly withdrawn. She was feeling rested and had gone in anxious search of her daughter. When Gillian went outside into the little courtyard she found them all assembled there talking to a lay brother by the well. Amaryllis was quaffing a glass of the ice-cold water. She held out the glass to her. "Do have some, Jill," she said, "it's simply topping!"

Gillian was rather glad of the refreshment; she accepted a biscuit too from Mrs. Porter's bag.

"Do take Mrs. Driscoll round the place," said

Amaryllis to Mr. Frazer, "she hasn't seen it yet. And I've knocked my head against those low doors enough for one day!"

Mrs. Driscoll? Ian Frazer glanced at Gillian's ungloved hand and noticed her wedding-ring for the first time.

"Please let me have that pleasure," he said; "I know every inch of the place. I'm often here," he added as they moved away, "you see, I'm a Franciscan tertiary."

"I'm afraid I'm frightfully ignorant about these things," said Gillian. "Does it mean you are a Catholic?"

"Oh, yes, that comes first. And with me the other seemed to follow as a natural course."

"Do you live up here?"

"Yes—not far from where I met you this morning. I've turned an old farm-house into quite a respectable villa. It does very well for me. I'm a writer."

Gillian was scarcely listening. "Did you become a Catholic, Mr. Frazer?" she asked.

His face showed a little surprise at the question.

"Yes—I'm a convert," he answered.

"Is it very difficult?"

"I didn't find it so. I wanted to be one most awfully when I was still at Eton." His voice grew suddenly grave. "They've cut me off with a penny in consequence. Or, rather—without the penny!" And now he smiled with an enchanting radiance in his eyes.

"And don't you mind that frightfully?" Gillian asked. She found it easy to talk to this stranger with his sympathetic eyes and voice.

"Being poor? Not a little bit! I've enough to eat, I've the loveliest view to look at all day long. I have peace and tranquillity, and luckily lots of

work to do. And I'm in love with my own little hermitage. You must come and see it if you are staying on in Assisi. Persuade Miss Porter to come up with you one day." He dropped his voice. "I'd rather meet her there than here. I'd rather meet her in a foursome at golf than anywhere! But *here*—she doesn't seem to fit in. She made fun of everything. She simply screamed with laughter at the beautiful old stories! You," he looked at her quietly, "you fit in quite beautifully, Mrs. Driscoll."

A faint wave of colour mounted to Gillian's brow. They were standing on the bridge that hangs across the gorge whose torrent was once miraculously dried. Ilex trees cast a dark shadow across the place, shielding them from the hot sunlight. She looked up at him wondering.

"Do I?" she said. "I don't feel as if I fitted in at all. It's so strange and new and overpowering. I never felt like this before even in Rome."

When she looked up at him like that it seemed to him that her eyes held a profound sadness, as if they had gazed upon unendurable griefs.

"Ah," he said sympathetically, "many people feel like that upon coming to Assisi for the first time. It's wonderful how the Saint's aura—if I may use such an expression—hangs still over the place. I hope you are going to stay here for a bit?"

"I haven't made any plans," said Gillian quietly. "I should be glad," she added timidly, "if you would come one day and see me."

"I don't often come down to Assisi," he acknowledged frankly, "but then I don't often have such an inducement."

He showed her then the tiny cells that were still visible, especially that one carved out of the rock

where St. Francis had slept with a log of wood for his only pillow. The doorways were so low that she had to bend her head to pass beneath them. But each cupboard-like cell or chapel possessed some memory, some relic of the Saint who had sojourned in this abode that was as remote and solitary as an eagle's eyrie.

When they had explored every permissible nook and cranny they returned to Mrs. Porter and Amaryllis, and rested a little till it was time to start once more upon their homeward way. The Porters had been partaking of some refreshment in the shape of sandwiches which they had brought with them, and insisted upon Gillian's doing likewise. She ate one to please them, but she did not feel hungry. They started off, and Mrs. Porter with considerable obstinacy insisted upon walking the first part of the way home. She invited Mr. Frazer to accompany them back to luncheon.

Before accepting he glanced at Gillian. But in her tranquil, composed face there was nothing to suggest encouragement or the reverse. Amaryllis was, however, frankly and eagerly persuasive. He therefore smilingly accepted.

He walked on ahead with Miss Porter, their two tall, well-set-up British figures looking singularly striking and well-matched.

"He seems really quite taken with Ammy," murmured Mrs. Porter. "Did you notice how he jumped at the idea of coming back with us?"

"I'm not surprised. Ammy's looking charming," replied Gillian conventionally. But the little speech delighted Ammy's mother.

"Yes—isn't she?" It's wonderful how a successful love affair improves a girl's looks. Still, I do

hope she will tell this Mr. Frazer that she is engaged!"

Ammy was not reticent and loved to proclaim her engagement from the house-tops, so Gillian thought it was more than probable that she had already confided it to Mr. Frazer. But she did not say so aloud.

CHAPTER XVI

DURING the next few days it was borne in upon Mrs. Porter that she had made an initial mistake with regard to Ian Frazer. It was not Ammy who offered that magnet for his frequent descents to the town; it was Mrs. Driscoll.

"That young man," she announced to her daughter one day about a week after the expedition to the Carceri, "is falling in love with Gillian."

Amaryllis gave one of her hearty bursts of laughter.

"You're wrong there, Mum! Mr. Frazer is a Catholic, and he couldn't marry Jill if he wanted to!"

"Well, they've gone out together. I saw them start."

"Oh, there's nothing in that," replied Amaryllis, who had wished to be invited to accompany them, but in spite of the broadest of hints had failed to attain her object. "They've gone down to the Tescio. I'm sure he'll have to haul Jill up the hill. They'll have such a nice serious conversation all the way—all about Giotto and St. Francis and the frescoes." She yawned. "There's absolutely nothing to do in Assisi, is there, now we've seen all the churches?"

It was her invariable speech preliminary to suggested departure if a place bored her. She added then with a laugh, "And Jill's cut me out with the only young man here!"

"My dear Ammy," said her mother in a tone of shocked disapproval, "you mustn't forget you are engaged. I wish you took it more seriously. When I was engaged to your dear father I scarcely spoke to any other young man."

"How dull it must have been," said Ammy. "Hengist would never be so selfish. He likes me to have a good time. I wonder, though, what men see in Jill? She's so quiet, isn't she? And she seems so old—not like a girl. I suppose she's fretting about that scoundrel Aylmer. And she's not really pretty now—no style about her!"

"Those quiet women," said Mrs. Porter with an air of superior wisdom, "are often the most dangerous. And then, Jill is very well off—that always counts with men! I suppose this young Frazer knows that she has divorced her husband?"

"Oh yes—I told him myself—the first day," said Ammy complacently; "he seemed for the moment quite shocked. Catholics, you see, disapprove of divorce."

"Still he comes to see her. He comes nearly every day," objected Mrs. Porter.

"Oh yes, he comes all right!" replied Miss Porter cheerfully.

"Well, Jill must manage her own affairs," said Mrs. Porter in a resigned tone. "That marriage of hers was a great mistake. I told Matty Stanway so at the time. I suppose Lady Pallant engineered it. Gillian was hardly more than eighteen, and she looked a perfect child. It ought never to have been allowed!"

But Amaryllis fell back upon her old statement.

"I always said that Aylmer was a bad egg," she remarked, "and I'm not at all sure that Jill's friend Deborah Venning wasn't a worse one!"

"Deborah? What nonsense, my dear Ammy! She is the most devoted daughter imaginable to that wretched hypochondriacal old man! She is a perfect slave to his whims and fancies. There has never been a word against Deborah Venning!"

"That's more from good luck than from good

guidance," said Amaryllis, who had once observed Aylmer and Deborah lounging in a canoe on a Thames backwater, but who had kept the knowledge to herself with most unusual discretion. She had never since then been in the least deceived by the innocent pursuits of Deborah—the gardening, the photography, the tireless devotion to an aged invalid father. She had wondered sometimes if Gillian knew anything, and if so why she was so obstinately silent.

Meanwhile Mr. Frazer and Gillian were walking slowly down the steep and dusty road, beyond the Porta San Francesco, which skirts the foot of the hill above which the convent stands like some mighty fortress. On one side of the road a high wall was thickly covered with masses of ivy, brambles, wild clematis, and cistus; on the other the olive orchards dipped down to the river. The sun shone on the sharply silhouetted grey foliage of the olives, enhancing their strange silveriness. Gillian thought that they looked like moonlight trees, just as the ilexes at the Villa Meldola had seemed to belong to the twilight. Across the green valley, filled with vines and corn, the white roads dipped and rose like twisted shining ribands, while the broad almost waterless sandy bed of the Tescio cut a wider cleft through the landscape. Sometimes they passed a humble little grey cottage, beneath whose penthouse roof was sheltered the fading yet exquisite fresco of a Madonna and Child. What hand had put it there, dedicating time and talent and skill to the decoration of that forlorn little dwelling? Rather had it not been done perhaps as a labour of love, and for the beautiful and simple reason that passers-by might thus be stayed for one moment's recollection upon their way, one moment's joyful prayer as

if in recognition of the old saying so often inscribed upon the wayside shrines of the south:

C'è un' allegria
Incontrar la Madonna in sua via. . . .

Now above their heads the church with its fine belfry was almost completely hidden, and the impregnable creamy-brown walls of the convent looked more than ever like a mighty fortress perched on the very edge of the precipice whose sides were covered with verdure, with dwarf acacias deliciously emerald, with grass and bramble bushes and gnarled olive trees. A little path to the right took them down to the river bed, and they walked on under the shade of the trees. It was very quiet and silent and peaceful. Here and there little farms stood out greyly, pale among the olives, or an old watch-tower lifted its small but massive shape. The hills towards Perugia were painted like fading violets in the afternoon haze; the nearer ones stood up grey and bare. Against the severe austerity so characteristic of the Umbrian landscape the vivid emerald tints of the early summer foilage made a contrast that was violent and arresting.

"Don't you see, Mrs. Driscoll," Ian Frazer was saying, "that it may have been to save you from taking any decisive step that you came to Italy?"

"Just lately I have thought it might be so," Gillian confessed.

He was the first person to whom she had confided the story of the last few months. She had indeed told him the whole of it, without any reserve. The divorce, Paul Pallant's wish to marry her, which would inevitably meet with the disapproval of his mother, supported by the opinion of the Reverend Mark Reynolds; her arrival in Rome, her meeting with Giacomo, their brief engagement with its

abrupt termination. She had not even spared herself the recital of that interview with Marchesa della Meldola, which had scorched her heart with very shame. It had not been easy to confess how weakly she had acted towards both these men who had loved her, and how swiftly she had consented to Giacomo's wish for an engagement. But it had been an enormous relief to speak of these events, and in doing so something of their sting seemed to have been removed.

"And now I suppose I shall marry Paul," she added simply. It was this admission which had prompted Ian's remark.

"You see—I'm hoping you won't marry," he said after a short pause, his blue eyes fixed upon the horizon.

"Why should you hope that?" she asked.

His face was set. "Hasn't it ever occurred to you that there must have been some very definite reason to make the Meldolas behave like that?"

"Oh, they're Catholics," she said. "Of course things are different for them. They are obliged to obey laws that are now antiquated and cruel."

They had come to the bridge of Santa Croce that traverses the Tescio near the grouped buildings of a little farm. There was a shrine there with a crucifix. Frazer stood before it, reverently uncovering his head. Then he turned to her and there was a strange light in his blue eyes.

"And isn't that antiquated and cruel?" he said.

She was silent. It was very still there, very silent. They seemed quite alone with the grey mountains watching them. . . .

"Yet in this sign we conquer," Frazer said coldly; "any sacrifice we can make seems trivial and paltry in comparison with that."

Gillian flushed.

"You think I should remain alone, without love and without ties, all my life because my husband was unfaithful to me? I am not yet twenty-three."

There was protest as well as anger in her voice.

"If you were a Catholic that is precisely what you would have to do, unless your husband died," he said.

"Thank heaven I'm not one then!" said Gillian violently.

She turned her eyes away from the crucifix. She could not at that moment bear to look at it. It seemed to her to be making an appeal to her, passionate although inarticulate. There was something in that rude presentment of the suffering Christ that did definitely speak to her soul. She felt it in every nerve of her body. She shrank away, piteously, helplessly.

Then she looked timidly at Frazer as if to see whether her violent words had shocked him. His lips moved; she thought he must be praying. The strange stern lines of his face were oddly emphasised.

"What a cruel, horrible religion!" she said, stifling a sob.

"If this world were all it might seem cruel. As it is, our vision should be fixed upon the eternal reward, offered after what is almost an absurdly brief probation."

He looked at her then almost compassionately as if she had been a little child rebelling against its first experience of pain.

She said quickly:

"There's nothing in the world to prevent my marrying Paul. We should be quite independent of Lady Pallant. I hate being alone. I'm not one of those women who can occupy themselves with all sorts of little petty concerns from morning till night.

I am sick to death of my present life. I don't love Paul, it is true, but I'm very fond of him and he adores me. I was afraid that I might be bored—but now I seem to want the very peace and security he can give me!"

"Please don't think I'm blind to your point of view," said Frazer more gently; "don't think I am unimaginative of the kind of sacrifice that would be demanded of you."

They had moved away now and were walking slowly up the steep hill towards Assisi. Gillian was moving on a little ahead of him. Every now and then he caught a glimpse of her white troubled face.

She said at last, facing him:

"I couldn't, couldn't do it! Not even if I were a Catholic. I tell you I've never been able to understand Giacomo. I can only believe that he didn't really care."

"If you were a Catholic you would understand," he said quietly, "and you would find it less hard. Discipline always makes things easier when temptation comes. That is why we train the soldier in time of peace. The dull monotonous daily drill and daily obedience prepare us until to conform becomes a habit of the soul. And then it isn't so easy to break the habit when it's been instilled into us day by day over a very long period of time. It becomes easier to obey than to disobey, easier to do violence to the body than to the soul."

He spoke with a kind of rapt earnestness. Gillian felt the sincerity of his words, although she rebelled against them.

"I'm sure we were intended to be happy!" she exclaimed.

"Isn't that," he pursued, "the doctrine of an ignorant child? The Catholic finds no happiness apart from conformity to the will of God. To dis-

obey gives not happiness but torment, separating the soul from God. This is a much stronger, fiercer pain than can be produced by any crucifixion of the physical senses."

Gillian felt bewildered and confused. The man beside her was young; at most he could be five or six and twenty, yet he spoke of sacrifice as if it were a right rather than a burden. Not a hard thing to be eluded, but the right claimed by the soul in its earnest striving after God; the right to suffer as Christ had suffered; the right of the Christian to take up his cross daily in imitation of the Divine example, and bleed and bend beneath that sorrowful load. . . .

"Oh," he said suddenly, "I wish I could make you see clearly!"

She was silent, and hurried on a little with her face averted. Against her will his words were influencing her, in spite of her fierce desire to oppose and combat them.

"You find it all so easy, then?" she said at last, pausing, for the path was steep and she was beginning to feel a little tired. They stood facing each other. There was no one else in sight.

"I have not always found it easy. But the daily drill is beginning to do its work. I'm afraid I'm not a very malleable person, and the Hand of the Potter hurts, you know, when one has to be made into another vessel. It hasn't been easy to hammer me into some sort of shape."

"But you're content?" She flung the word at him almost with contempt.

"Very much so," he answered, smiling.

"Why, you're little better than a slave!"

"Wasn't St. Paul proud to call himself the prisoner of Christ?—he who was born free, the citizen of no mean city?"

She struck in: "What has that got to do with us here—now—in the twentieth century?"

"Exactly as much as it had to do with St. Paul in the first!" he answered, and his face broke into a smile.

"I can't believe it. Things change. They have to be adjusted to the times in which we live—to the needs of a newer generation."

"The Church doesn't change," he reminded her, "she keeps the Word inviolate."

He looked up towards the brown tower of St. Francesco. On that bright June afternoon its belfry arches framed spaces of almost unbelievable blue. . . .

"Oh," he said, "I don't want to offend you, Mrs. Driscoll, but perhaps—I hope and pray at least that it may be so—you have come to Assisi to learn . . . here where St. Francis made his great renunciation and became the Little Poor Man of God!"

His voice with its cold and passionless eloquence stirred Gillian in spite of herself. She said nothing, but side by side they walked through the Porta S. Giacomo back into the town. Women sat upon the doorsteps knitting; children and dogs and chickens played about in the dusty roadway. Men lounged idly, smoking the cheap black Italian cigars, and cast curious glances at the English couple as they passed. At the door of the hotel they parted. Gillian felt as if there were something at once wistful and compassionate in the look he bestowed upon her as he said good-bye.

CHAPTER XVII

WHEN Gillian went up to her room she found two English letters waiting for her. One was from Miss Letitia, and the other from Paul Palant. The sight of his handwriting at that moment was a little unwelcome to her, jarring upon her nerves after the conversation she had had with Ian Frazer that afternoon. She laid it aside rather impatiently and opened her aunt's letter. Miss Letitia used thin foreign paper of the old-fashioned slippery kind and her writing was rather shaky and indistinct. But Gillian very soon grasped the gist of the letter. Miss Matty was decidedly worse, and although she still insisted upon getting up at the usual hour and coming downstairs every day she was looking dreadfully thin and ill. Aunt Letty acknowledged that she felt anxious and uneasy about her. She wished that Gillian were not so far away. But perhaps she would be returning to England soon. Items of Bath news, of no particular interest to Gillian, followed, and the letter concluded a little abruptly because "post is going and Matty is calling me."

Gillian meditated a little upon this letter; for the moment she forgot that other envelope directed in Paul's handwriting that was lying close to her elbow. Aunt Letty was evidently seriously anxious about her sister. It was now some time since Miss Matty's health had begun to fail. Last time Gillian had seen her quite early in the year she had not looked at all well, and she had been unable to accompany her sister to town to say good-bye to Gillian just before she left for Italy. She was not a woman to give in very easily to failing health. Resting with her was

"sloth." She would be certain to put up a grim fight.

Then Gillian remembered Paul's letter and slowly opened it. . . .

He had not written to her for some weeks and he seemed distressed because she had not answered his former letters. From the time of her first meeting with Giacomo, Gillian had not written to Paul. When she became engaged she made up her mind to break gradually with Paul, to write less and less often, to teach him by degrees that he must cease to hope. Then as the date of her marriage grew nearer she would tell him of her intention to marry Giacomo and thus sever the ties that held her to England with one swift, irrevocable cutting of the knot.

Since the rupture with Giacomo she had not communicated with anybody except her old aunts. Her heart was too sore for letter-writing. She did not wish to tell any one at home of the episode. Now, in the utter loneliness and desolation that had supervened upon Giacomo's abrupt breaking of the engagement, her thoughts had turned insensibly towards Paul, and there was no doubt she had begun to consider seriously the question of marrying her cousin. In a world that seemed made up of faithlessness, perfidy, and change, she saw in Paul something that was unchanging as a rock. Paul would always love her. He would give her the secondary happiness which was all she could ever hope to claim. Paul would give her the things she wished for—love, a place in the world, a home, perhaps children. She did not love him, but she was very fond of him, and she felt that in time her very gratitude would teach her to love him. Only to-day Ian Frazer's words had sown in her heart all manner of uncomfortable doubts and fears. Perhaps Paul's

letter might help to dispel them, to mitigate their influence.

It was a long letter, full of his hopes and plans for the future. He was uneasy at her silence; he seemed to dread some change in her. She had not, it is true, given him much hope, but then she had not, on the other hand, left him quite hopeless. Now he implored her to write. At the end came these words: "Good-bye, most darling Gillian. Let me have your answer soon. You make me fear . . . when I think of all the power you have to wound me in those two little beautiful hands of yours."

This man wished to marry her. He told her he could not wait beyond October. And what need was there to wait? She turned back to the first sheet and read over again: "I can't bear your being so far away. Why don't you come back to England? I can't picture you in those places I have never seen."

A loud knock at the door signified the arrival of Miss Porter. Gillian rose and opened it. Her letters were still lying loose on the table. She was not extremely pleased at being thus interrupted.

"Had a nice walk?" inquired Miss Porter teasingly.

"Yes—such a pretty walk," answered Gillian, scarcely knowing what she said. Already the trivial episode seemed to her to have been swallowed up in the immense remote past. Her thoughts were full of Paul Pallant, who was offering her now more than he knew. Offering her indeed so much that had he come into the room she thought she could have fallen on her knees and thanked him. . . .

Amaryllis walked up to the window, and sitting down in an armchair gazed out upon the view that

was now bathed in the golden evening light. Then she turned to Gillian.

"You look tired, Jill," she said; "was the conversation very strenuous?"

Gillian laughed evasively. "It depends upon what you call strenuous."

"He is charming, but just a trifle heavy in hand," pursued Ammy. "I'm sure though he'd be a nailer on the links. I dare say he could give me two up and beat me! And of course he is very good-looking. But you mustn't let yourself fall in love with him. He's a Catholic and so he couldn't possibly marry you. Perhaps you don't know that, but they are not allowed to marry any one who's got a divorced husband or wife."

"Of course I know that," replied Gillian. The knowledge had been veritably branded into her flesh, and she was almost amazed with herself for thus answering Amaryllis in a matter-of-fact tone. "You need not be at all afraid—I am not in the least likely to fall in love with Mr. Frazer or any one else."

"You've had letters, I see," said Miss Porter, surveying the little heap of torn envelopes.

"Yes, I have heard from home. Aunt Letty says that Aunt Matty is getting worse. She seems anxious about her. And I have heard from my cousin Paul Pallant. You remember the Pallants, don't you, Ammy?"

"Only the old lady. But I've heard that Paul would be very good-looking if he weren't so small!"

"He isn't so very small," said Gillian rather resentfully; "he is only about an inch shorter than I am."

"Yes, but that's tiny for a man," said Amaryllis, who boasted of six feet in her stockings. "I sometimes wonder who you'll marry in the end, Jill."

"Perhaps no one," said Mrs. Driscoll with a strange little smile.

Was it the result of some curious process of thought-transference that Amaryllis should come now and speak to her of marriage?

"Oh, I know you've had a perfectly rotten experience," said Miss Porter pityingly, "but still all men aren't like Aylmer."

"No . . . I suppose not."

"I dare say we shall have all sorts of ups and downs—Hengist and I," continued Miss Porter, "but they'll be just the ordinary commonplace ups and downs that most people have. I'm not a bit afraid, because I feel I can trust him. And if you could meet some one who gave you that feeling it would be the happiest thing for you to marry him. You're too young to be alone on your own like this."

"I shall get older every year," said Gillian.

She took up Paul's letter, folded it meticulously and put it back in the envelope. Was not Paul just such a man as Amaryllis had described—some one who could be wholly trusted, and with whom the ordinary ups and downs could be bravely and cheerfully faced? The comfort of his letter had brought a little peace back to her heart.

Amaryllis rose; she was finding her friend a little dull and uncommunicative.

"If it hadn't been for Aylmer I really believe this young Frazer would have fallen in love with you," she said.

"What nonsense!" said Gillian flushing; "why, I don't think he even likes me!"

"Likes you? Of course he does! Do you suppose he comes down from his eyrie six days out of seven just for the good of his health?" rejoined Miss Porter briskly.

She went out of the room laughing.

"She is wrong," said Gillian to herself; "he only comes because he thinks it is his mission to save my soul."

She was aware in her intercourse with this man, who did not hesitate to speak the most bitter and unpalatable truths to her, that his liking for her was based on a very different footing from any other that had hitherto been offered to her. She had had experience of the sudden passion she could arouse, evinced in turn by Aylmer, Paul, and Giacomo. But this man could look her coldly in the eyes and tell her where he considered her wrong. The process was not pleasant; it was like going to school again to a severe schoolmaster who set at defiance all former systems of education. Gillian fought hard against the growing influence of Ian Frazer. She told herself that he was a fanatic. He had fanatical eyes; she could picture him going to the stake with head erect and mouth grimly set, a triumphant and conquering figure. He did not care for her at all, but he cared very much for "the pilgrim soul in her." And through it all she had the uncomfortable consciousness that he might be right. He was giving her scruples, her conscience was beginning to prick her warningly, and she could only combat its admonitions with a weak and nervous defiance. It was not a pleasant thing to believe that in the event of her remarrying she would be committing what a very large number of people held to be a grave sin.

She sat down by the window, and leaning her head on her hands looked out at the wide landscape of mountain and plain. She thought she could almost have drawn the view from memory. Green and grey the Umbrian plain lay beautifully outspread, touching the feet of those grave mountains. Perugia was silhouetted against the sky; the city was in

shadow now, she could only see the massed shapes of its towers. In the garden below crickets were chirping shrilly and the frogs were chanting their ceaseless *couac couac*. The little white hamlets and villages down in the plain looked like pale spots breaking the verdure.

Presently she rose and went downstairs and crept out of the hotel. She hurried across the steep white piazza and gained the Lower Church. Its soft darkness seemed to touch her with a healing hand; she groped her way in, and mounting the steps into the chapel of the Blessed Sacrament she knelt down and prayed.

Her prayer was at first formless, it was an almost inarticulate appeal for guidance. The mystery and sanctity of the hour quieted the fierce disturbance of her thoughts and gave her an unaccustomed sense of peace. She could not come here any more—and this fact was borne in upon her with all the illumination of a sudden revelation—and say to herself, "I don't believe—I don't believe," and then go away with conscience and its cruel scruples silenced. She believed, and at that moment she ceased temporarily to struggle and fight. If she became a Catholic she must renounce all thought of marriage, all her dreams of a home, of little children playing around her. The thought coldly envisaged would at any other time have proved unbearable; she would have dismissed it summarily. But now and here it was no longer unbearable. The soul asserted its claims; its eternal claims, its superior rights. Ian Frazer had shown her clearly what those rights were. He had taught her the truth almost brutally and she had been compelled to look at it. And with that steady envisagement it had lost already something of its terror. She did not actually fear it nor shrink from it any more. It could not make her heart sink,

her limbs tremble. She could face it undismayed. Even the figure of Ian Frazer had drifted beyond her thoughts. He was only a machine, an instrument, a messenger. . . .

Not always is the soul aware of any definite post passed in its individual spiritual development. Normally that development is a slow, tentative process, subject to innumerable conditions that oppose and thwart it in its purpose. But Gillian knew quite definitely that on that evening she had passed through a spiritual crisis that had the power to change drastically her future life. And for the moment the soul had triumphed, was in the ascendant, asserting arrogantly its lordship, its immortal rights. This gave her no sense of elation, of achievement; those emotions belong to the attainment of the temporal prize. Rather it brought to her a sense of exhaustion as if she had emerged from some fierce physical crisis and struggle; she even felt a diminution of physical strength. She had, too, a feeling of absolute aridity, as if she had no power to make further effort or progress. There was as yet no joy in this new faith that had fought its way into her heart, with a fierce persistence that would not be gainsaid. It had seemed to her almost like an actual physical onrush of wild waters bent on overwhelming her; the waves had lifted her off her feet, their strength had given her a moment of terror almost great enough to kill her. No resistance was of any avail, but then all desire to resist had most strangely left her. She felt, too, as if she had been pursued and captured by some violent and powerful hunter that had marked her down for a special quarry. . . . And after the chase, after the capture, she had seemed to lie for just one indescribable moment in welcoming arms that surrounded and comforted her. . . . The wild waves

had become a serene sea whereon she could lie dreamily floating; the fierce captor had suddenly assumed the guise of a friend bent upon saving her from some unimagined peril. . . .

When she left the church dusk was falling, drawing soft misty purple veils over the plain. Only the mountains were clearly outlined against a serene sky. She could see Perugia's ring of gleaming lights from her little terrace. Westward the sky was painted brilliantly with scarlet and crimson as if the colours of a lavish palette had been spilled thereon. . . .

Limp and exhausted Gillian crept into bed.

CHAPTER XVIII

IN the early hours of the morning she scribbled a little note to Ian Frazer: "Don't come. I cannot see you to-day.—G. D." She gave it to the maid who brought her early coffee, and asked that it should be sent up at once to that remote abode in the hills.

At nine o'clock Amaryllis marched into the room. "Lazy beggar," she admonished, stooping down and kissing Gillian. "What on earth are you lying in bed for this lovely morning? My word though—you are looking washed out! What's up?"

She contemplated Gillian with interested eyes.

"I've had a very bad night and I feel a most awful wreck," said Mrs. Driscoll, flushing a little under the friendly scrutiny.

"I've had a telegram from Hengist," said Amaryllis; "he's got leave sooner than he thought, and he wants us to meet him at Marseilles. I've just got mother to agree, but it wasn't an easy job. She can't bear having new plans sprung on her the first thing in the morning. We shall have to start to-day, as of course I want to get there before he does."

"Of course you do," agreed Gillian. "And will that mean you'll be married soon, Ammy dear?"

"I expect that's what he'll want," returned Miss Porter complacently, but with a sudden access of colour.

Gillian felt a pang of envy at her friend's happiness. "I'm so glad, Ammy," she said quietly; "I'm sure you'll be very happy. You deserve to be."

"Oh well, I shan't grumble whatever happens,"

said Miss Porter. "I've told Hengist I'm ready to go to any place habitable or uninhabitable in the globe—wherever his duty takes him. I wasn't looking for a soft billet, so I shan't sit down and howl when the road's rough. You have to be jolly fond of a man to feel like that, I can tell you, Jill!"

"I'm sorry you are going away," said Gillian. She began to feel that she would be more than ever lonely when the Porters had taken their departure.

"Shall you stay on here?" inquired Miss Porter.

"For a little. I haven't made any plans. And I'm getting to like the place."

"Won't you find it very dull?"

"Oh, I don't think so."

"Don't let Mr. Frazer bore you too much," said Amaryllis teasingly.

"Oh, I shan't let him bore me."

Amaryllis looked at her with increased attention. A sudden consciousness that something was terribly awry in the life of this woman who was so little older than herself stirred her to a sudden pity.

"I say," she blurted out, "are you very miserable, Jill?"

"I am not very happy," said Gillian with an effort.

"You ought to marry. You're at such a loose end—rotting about these foreign places alone."

"I don't think I want to marry," said Gillian vaguely.

A month ago she had been passionately rebellious because she could not marry Giacomo della Meldola, and now even that episode was fading a little from her mind. She was in a passive state, receiving new impressions and suggestions that disturbed and tormented her, even while they were subtly changing and moulding her. So must the passive clay be twisted and tormented, beaten into its destined

shape. Had not Ian Frazer said that the Hand of the Potter hurt as it wrought its work upon the wheel? She could feel the pain of that new shaping in every nerve of her body. Just for the moment she was not rebellious, she had surrendered herself limply but entirely to the process of that moulding. She was suffering, but not as a child suffers, without comprehension; she resembled more a person who has deliberately submitted his body to the sharp torture of the surgeon's knife for a definite purpose, careless of the suffering if by this means the end can be achieved. How long this condition of mind would last with her she could not tell. It might be that old influences would arise and re-assert their dominion over her. It might be that this was only a passing phase of emotion to which she had temporarily yielded herself. But whatever its character the new influence had the upper hand of her at the moment. She was too weak to struggle. Last night she had felt sheltered and comforted; to-day she felt only a despairing aridity of soul.

She became aware that Amaryllis was speaking.

"Depend upon it," she was saying with conviction, "that when you feel about a man as I do about Hengist you've spotted a winner, you have got hold of a dead cinch as they say in America. In fact, it's *It*. I want you to get hold of a dead cinch, too, Jill!"

Gillian said slowly: "I believe it's the fate of some women never to get hold of a—a dead cinch, Ammy." The unaccustomed expression brought a smile to her lips, but there were tears in her eyes.

When Amaryllis had left her she still made no attempt to get up and dress. The window was open and the soft morning air, refreshed by heavy night dews and mists, touched her forehead languorously. She tried to read, but found that it was impossible

to fix her attention. The actual crisis had passed, and now a little reaction had set in. Last night—even early this morning—everything had seemed comparatively easy; she had been as it were uplifted upon wings, an exaltation that was rather imposed than desired. But now fresh doubts began to creep into her heart. She had yielded, there could be no doubt, to a passing fugitive emotion, very strong, very compelling, but surely of no permanent influence. It had threatened to take possession of her, change her life, condemn her to what amounted to martyrdom in so far as earthly happiness was concerned.

As she recognised this a little hot sense of rebellion came into her heart. She would not yield. She had allowed herself to be unduly influenced by Ian Frazer. He had made her superstitiously afraid of taking her life into her own hands and shaping it as she would, extracting from it something of temporal peace and pleasure. Why should she be less fortunate than Amaryllis? "God can't want me to be unhappy," she said to herself. When Ian Frazer's words came back to her memory she put them from her resolutely. Catholics, he had said, could find no happiness apart from conformity with the Will of God. Why should she listen to this man with his dismal teaching? She rose at last, dressed herself with an almost feverish haste, and went down to luncheon, partaking of this meal in the company of the Porters. She afterwards accompanied them to the station and witnessed their departure. She was genuinely sorry that they had gone; she felt that Assisi would seem a little lonely without them. And she knew that she would be rather at the mercy of Ian Frazer—she almost dreaded meeting him again.

Fate, however, intervened, for on the following morning when she was sitting writing letters in her room a knock at the door disturbed her.

In answer to her "*Avanti!*" a servant entered bringing her a telegram. It was from her aunt, and ran as follows:

"Matty seriously ill. Come at once.—LETITIA STANWAY."

Gillian scribbled her reply, "Coming immediately. GILLIAN," and gave it to the maid. Then almost mechanically she rose and began to do her packing. One thought filled her mind. The message had seemed to her almost like a sign. She would shake herself free of Assisi, of all that she had learned there. She would not see Ian Frazer again; he would know nothing of her departure until after she had gone. She was going back to England; she was going to see Paul. Her journey seemed infinitely less concerned with Aunt Matty's illness than with Paul.

July wrapped Italy in a lovely golden embrace as the train passed northward; the liquid gold of that summer light lay beautifully upon the vineyards and olive orchards, on the stacks of corn that had just been reaped. In Switzerland, however, it was raining and the rain followed her through France; she felt chilled and cold and rather desolate. She reached town on the afternoon of the second day, and caught an express from Paddington to Bath. She wondered what news awaited her. As the train sped through the quiet and familiar beauty of the Thames valley she remembered suddenly, almost inconsequently, that she had never answered Paul's letter. She had put it aside intending to write to him, and then in her hurried departure had found no time to do so.

The news revealed itself in her first glimpse of the little grey house where her girlhood had been spent. It was night, and no lights were visible in any of the windows. The blinds were all drawn down,

giving that blank look to the windows as of blind unseeing eyes. The cab stopped and the door was flung open without delay. In the hall Aunt Letty flung her arms around her sobbing, "You're too late, dear. She passed away last night." Gillian, startled and bewildered, bent down and kissed the wet withered cheek in mute sympathy. Then she followed her aunt upstairs.

It was when they had left Miss Martha's room that Aunt Letty, still clasping Gillian's arm, said wistfully: "I'm thankful to have you back, my dear. And I thought perhaps now that we were both alone, you would stay and make your home with me. Oh, I know it's too early to make plans—but Matty was all my world, and I shall feel so lost without her. You know how clever she was, and how she used to keep me from saying and doing foolish things." It was thus she charitably envisaged that past tyranny against which she had never rebelled. She looked pitifully at Gillian. "I'm sure I don't know what I shall do without her."

Her weak old face was distorted with grief. Gillian kissed her. That so recent contact with death had chilled her, and she was shivering a little and could hardly control her voice as she said: "As you say, it's too soon to make plans. But at any rate I'm not going to run away just yet." She was angry with herself because she felt no grief, only a strange excitement at finding herself back in England with a prospect that could not be delayed of seeing Paul again. Only she wanted most dreadfully to be left alone, and Miss Letty showed no signs of leaving her. She found herself compelled to listen, even at this late hour when she was so tired, to all the details of that last illness. It was a story of grim endurance, of unimaginable physical suffering, and it invested that strange, grim little figure lying now

so quietly asleep in its coffin with something of heroism. Gillian could well believe in that unconquered, valiant fortitude. It corresponded with all her previous knowledge of her aunt. If she had been a hard taskmaster, rigid, unpitying, and exacting, she had ever imposed upon herself the same stern discipline. And as she had lived so she had died. Actuated by other and widely different standards she had known the value of what Ian Frazer had called the daily drill and daily discipline in time of peace.

The funeral took place at the end of the week. Gillian, supporting her weeping aunt, had just turned away from the grave-side when she became conscious of a man standing near her with bowed uncovered head. Her eyes met his, and she was thankful that the thick mourning veil she was wearing concealed the deep flush that mounted to her cheek at the sight of him.

It was Paul Pallant. He accompanied her and Miss Stanway to the carriage and opened the door for them. Then he said quietly to Gillian:

"When may I come and see you?"

From his lips the words sounded more like a demand than a request. She answered coldly: "This evening if you like. Come about six."

He lifted his hat as they drove away.

"My dear, who is that young man? He seemed very kind and attentive," said poor Miss Letty, burying her face in a black-edged handkerchief and blowing her nose violently.

"That is Cousin Janet's son—Paul Pallant," said Gillian.

She was angry to find that the sudden meeting had made her tremble in every limb. She had believed herself to be perfectly indifferent to Paul. . . .

CHAPTER XIX

PAUL had wandered round the Royal Crescent and back again into the Circus, waiting with ill-concealed impatience for the hour to strike. His feet trod restlessly that circular pavement. He found himself looking up at the great solid houses, deep grey in colour, for the Bath stone becomes almost black in the passing of years. The charming frieze in stone moulding that decorated every house with a conventional design pleased him. He remembered having heard somewhere that no two patterns were alike in design. In the centre of the Circus there was a round turfed space planted with immense plane trees. Their foliage was parched and dusty, and the grass beneath them was burnt into a dry brown. The quiet of the place, broken only by a rare vehicle passing over the cobbled stones of the roadway, soothed his nerves. He was longing yet dreading to see Gillian again.

July had come, and now in a few weeks she would be free. He did not dare hope that she would consent to be married before at least another three months had passed; he felt that he ought scarcely to desire that it should take place sooner, but he did wish to obtain some definite promise from her, to establish between them an engagement. Then he would return home and inform his mother of the progress of events. She was still perfectly in ignorance of his devotion to Gillian, indeed he had felt that it would be useless to inform her of it until something were definitely settled. The dregs of the cup promised to be bitter, for he was perfectly aware of her views on the subject. He knew, too, that after the divorce his mother had even been

averse to the continuance of Joan's intimacy with Gillian.

But Paul had inherited his mother's obstinate nature. Joan was amiably weak, as their father had been—except upon the subject of his food—yielding almost at the first hint of opposition; even if she ardently desired anything, she could easily be alarmed into a show of submission and renunciation. Paul, on the other hand, had, even as a child, taken what he wanted defiantly and fearlessly.

Two minutes after the hour he turned into Brock Street, with head thrown back and lips grimly set. At the far end of the street he came to the house which from time immemorial had been occupied by the Stanways. He had already passed it in his restless walk, had noted its exact position, had even regarded its dull exterior with a sense of wonder that anything so perfectly beautiful as Gillian should have emerged from such an unpromising *venue*. The little grey street seemed to him almost sad in its sombre, stolid respectability. His heart beat more quickly as he paused for a moment on the doorstep, he seemed now to have approached so closely to the desire of his heart that he scarcely dared go forward. Would he come forth this evening as a king among men, or only the most wretched bankrupt of fortune in the world? Suspense showed itself in the unimaginable pallor of his face, in the smouldering fires that blazed in his eyes. When his momentary hesitation had gone, he rang the bell and asked if Mrs. Driscoll were at home in a calm firm voice that held no trace of emotion.

He was shown into the drawing-room, a double room the back of which looked out on to the Park that offered a pleasing and shady prospect of turf and shrubs and trees. The window was open, and Gillian was sitting near it. She was alone and

appeared to be unoccupied, as if she were waiting for him. She rose to meet him, pale, languid, as if the events of the last few days had tried her a good deal. It seemed to him that her manner as she greeted him was a little distant, there was a new aloofness in it. It was as if she were tacitly intimating to him that if he so wished there need be no reference made to their last meeting. As she had left him free then, so he was to feel himself free now. She might have known, he thought with bitterness, that his very seeking of her precluded the possibility of his desiring that freedom.

He looked at her closely. The beloved face is seldom as we picture it in absence; it would almost seem as if love cruelly deprived the inward eye of its power of visualising that precious and elusive beauty. Yes, she was changed. He thought she looked sadder than ever—that was perhaps on account of the deep mourning she wore. And she was much more assured; she had the manner of a woman accustomed to complete independence of thought and action. She was very different from the shy silent girl who had come to his mother's house more than four years ago, and who had so quickly fallen under the spell of Aylmer Driscoll; she was different even from the broken yet defiant woman who had gone away last January to obtain rest and peace in a new environment. He, apprehensive of such change, began to wonder what influences had primarily caused it. After all she had scarcely lifted the veil at all from the happenings of those six past months.

"It was very kind and thoughtful of you, Paul, to come to poor Aunt Matty's funeral," she said; "you know I didn't get here in time to see her alive."

"We hadn't heard that she was worse," said Paul; "it was a great surprise to us to see her

death in the paper. I'm sure you must feel it awfully."

Gillian made no reply. She looked away from him, and her eyes seemed to be attentively studying the trees and the green sweep of sward beyond, the faint lilac outline of the distant hills.

"I knew, of course, you would come back directly you heard of it," said Paul. "I felt sure that I should find you here." His voice sounded rough in his effort not to betray his emotion. "You've been away an awful age, Jill. What on earth kept you so long out there? Did Italy offer so many attractions?"

"I disliked the thought of coming back even now," she said; "but that had little or nothing to do with the attractions of Italy."

It seemed to him that she was purposely avoiding meeting his gaze. Miles and miles of space lay between them and severed them. Once he had kissed her—her lips, her hands, that little white forehead of hers just where the dark hair touched it so softly. . . .

Yet the words had to be spoken.

"Dear Jill," he said at last, "I've come to ask you to stay in England—I wanted to welcome you myself. I'm sure you must guess why I am here. I want to be engaged to you—to win your promise to marry me."

He stood up now; his small rather delicate figure tense and alert. Gillian turned her head a little and watched him without speaking. He represented to her many things of which she had need. More than ever she saw in him the man who would always love her, obstinately, faithfully, tenderly. A man too whom she could love, for had not his very coming caused her pulse to beat more quickly? She saw in him security, safety, a rock-like reliability. If

she married him she would no longer remain *sur la branche*, without any abiding place.

"I love you, dear Jill," he said slowly, and his voice trembled a little.

"And your mother?" she said. "What would your mother say, Paul?"

"I'm afraid mothers have to go to the wall a little when a man makes up his mind to marry," he said. "Of course she won't like it—she has prejudices, as you yourself once told me. But that doesn't matter. Naturally I'd like everything to be smooth, but we can live without her approval. I shall tell her—I want to tell her—I'd like her to know."

Gillian relapsed into that strange silence of hers as if she were meditating deeply upon the situation. But in reality she was thinking of Giacomo della Meldola, and contrasting the two men in her mind. The brief madness of her engagement which had cost her so many tears and such genuine sorrow and disappointment, rose before her accusingly. She had been hurt superficially very much indeed; her heart as well as her pride had been wounded. But the wound had never cut deeply. She had known Giacomo so little and for so short a time. Their love had seemed almost like a beautiful dream that vanished when the cold light of dawn fell upon it. The headlong speed with which the affair had been conducted, the breathless excitement of it, had saved her. It was over almost before she had had time to realise it fully. It had no links with the past; in its brief transit it had struck no roots. She could be glad now to think that it had come to nothing. Very glad indeed with Paul Pallant there, speaking words of love that throbbed through all her being. It was always best for a woman to marry a man of her own country; it made of marriage a less complicated affair.

But Paul mistook her silence.

"Of course if you feel you can never love me, Jill, I'll go away. I'll never bother you again," he said humbly.

The remembrance of Giacomo had left her. Ian Frazer's words seemed to echo dully across the silence that followed. How absurd to wreck one's life, to forfeit a chance of real solid happiness, because of a few words uttered by a stranger! It was thus she reviewed Ian Frazer's speech. She was not going to permit herself to be influenced by it; she was not going to think now of that hour, which had once seemed to her so holy and so sacred, spent in the Lower Church at Assisi. . . . She was not going to send Paul away because of these things! Almost there was a touch of defiance informing her attitude towards him.

"It is such a tremendous question," she said at last. "And I don't want to injure your career, Paul. Lots of people think just as your mother does. We mustn't forget that. And if I marry you I shall be as guilty in their eyes as—as Aylmer!"

"I don't care what people say or think," said Paul stubbornly; "it does not matter to me, and if you love me it cannot matter to you!" He came over and knelt down near her, and taking her hands in his held them closely to his heart. She could feel the quick but steady beating of Paul's heart, and it seemed to her in that moment that he had become indescribably dear to her.

"Oh, my dear—my dear Gillian," he said, in a voice that shook with emotion.

"Listen," said Gillian quietly, "I have something to say to you, Paul. When you hear it you may not wish to marry me."

He looked up startled, with sudden inquiry in his

eyes. Why must she thus spoil that beautiful moment? . . .

"Why—what on earth is it, Jill?"

"When I was in Italy," she continued in that quiet level voice of hers, "I was engaged to be married."

"You? . . . Engaged!" His face darkened.

"Yes—to an Italian," she said.

Paul was silent. The colour flooded his face. He had never dreamed of such a contingency.

"You were in love with him?" he demanded fiercely.

"Yes. For a little while I thought I was very much in love with him. I was in love, too, with the thought of shutting the door upon my old life and everything to do with it—of starting quite fresh under new conditions. Can't you understand it?"

"Then why on earth," he said, still in that strange fierce voice, "didn't you marry him—and shut the door?"

"He broke off the engagement," answered Gillian, and a little of that past shame seemed again to envelop her.

"Broke it off?" Paul echoed incredulously.

"He found out that he couldn't marry me. He thought I was a widow—naturally I didn't go and tell my story to every one I met. But I was always meaning to tell him the truth, only I was afraid. I knew it would mean losing him, Paul. Then some one told him I had divorced my husband. He went away—I never saw him again. Afterwards his mother came to explain."

The confession seemed to plunge her once more into that abyss of humiliation which she had known during the interview with Giacomo's mother. Surely Paul, knowing all this, would have no further desire to make her his wife.

"Cur!" said Paul, grinding his teeth.

"He was a Catholic," pursued Gillian coldly, "and Catholics can't marry divorced people. I didn't know that at the time; I only thought his mother would probably disapprove so much that he would have to give me up. But it had really nothing to do with his mother. He broke off our engagement of his own will. I was very unhappy." She looked at him quite steadily.

"He could never have loved you at all! If he had loved you he would have gone through hell for you!"

"Ah, that's just what he couldn't risk doing," she said softly.

There was a long pause. Paul's brain was bewildered by the unexpectedness of her confession. Then another thought struck him, and its touch held poison.

"But, Jill, if you loved him enough to promise to marry him—it means that you could never have loved me?"

"Yes, I suppose it does. But I loved Giacomo differently. He was so young and eager and handsome—like a beautiful boy. And he fell in love with me so suddenly, so violently."

Her eyes softened at the remembrance of those idyllic Roman days. How far away they appeared now; how far removed from the little grey house in Brock Street where love was again approaching her with rainbow wings! . . .

She perceived that the news had shocked him deeply. Yet she had felt compelled to tell him that during the interval between their last meeting and this she had given her love to another man. And all the time Paul had been waiting, waiting for her return. . . .

"You never loved me then at all?" he said harshly.

"I told you—before I went away—that I didn't love you—that I didn't want to marry you," she said.

"That night—when I drove home with you—I thought you had begun to care a little for me! All the time you were gone I hoped and hoped. . . ."

She flushed a little and then said quickly, "I was sorry for you, you see. You seemed so miserable. It meant nothing—nothing at all. I was lonely and you comforted me. And I was glad to think some one still cared for me a little. I can't explain it, Paul. . . ."

But he was thinking of those remembered kisses. . . .

"You had definitely promised to marry this man?" he said, and his voice was still stern and cold.

"Yes, we had arranged to be married in October. I thought that would give me time to come back here and settle up things. He had a villa near Frascati—such a beautiful place. We were to spend our honeymoon there."

It had been her determination to tell Paul the whole truth. She wondered whether it would make any difference to his love for her. Perhaps he would think her a weak woman of facile affections. She would like to have known then what was passing in his mind.

Jealousy had clutched Paul's heart with its iron claws. Joyfully could he have slain this unknown rival.

"You'd actually fixed the date?" he said, more than ever mystified. "You'd got the better of those scruples you always served up for my benefit?" His tone was indescribably bitter.

"Just for the time," said Gillian still coldly, "but afterwards, when he threw me over, they came back with renewed force. You see, I learned what a

strong force it was that could thus separate Giacomo from me when we were so happy, when we loved each other so much. . . ."

"He never could have loved you!" Paul repeated.

"Paul, he *did* love me. But to him the marriage wouldn't have been a marriage. In the eyes of his world I shouldn't have been his wife at all. I think it was for my sake as much as for his own that he broke it all off." The sting of the shame touched her anew. "I was in the dust for the second time, Paul. But it made me ask myself what this Church was that could dominate even a man's love."

"His love could never have been worth anything at all," said Paul indignantly. "Do you think I should ever have let anything come between us, Gillian, if you had promised to be my wife? Anything in heaven or earth, if you had loved me?" His voice softened to a strange deep tenderness. "All these months you have been away, my thoughts have been full of you by day, and by night you were always in my dreams. Why weren't you honest with me? Why didn't you write and tell me that you were in love with this Italian?"

She was silent. Again he observed a child-like perplexed puckering of her brow. Yes, she was like a child who has been set too difficult a problem. . . .

"But I was a fool—I ought to have known, when you didn't write!" he burst forth, a dull savage anger in his tone.

"It lasted such a little time, and it was always an absolute secret. Then some one told his mother about me, and everything ended abruptly. But in any case I shouldn't have told you until our marriage was about to take place."

Her mind visualised with a strange detailed accuracy the twilight shelter of those ilex woods at Fras-

cati where they had wandered hand in hand, day after day, amid the soft shadows. The memory was sharp enough to evoke pain.

"Look here, Gillian!" he broke in abruptly upon her thoughts. "I don't care if you love me or not. Marry me, and I'll spend my life in trying to make you happy. I'll teach you to forget all the cruel past—all the things that have hurt you!" He came over and bending down put his arms round her and drew her head upon his shoulder. His face was very close to hers; he leaned nearer to her and kissed her.

Gillian made no effort to resist his embrace. It comforted and consoled her to find him still unchanged, in spite of all she had just told him; to know, too, that across the months of separation he loved her with an unchanging love and fidelity. And she had need of his love. Twice love had failed her, and her heart was wounded and bruised by the pain. If she did not love Paul, at least she loved his love. She was happy and at peace.

"Ah, don't make me love you, Paul," she said at last, looking up at him with tearful yet happy eyes. "It brings me *la guigne*."

"But I want you to love me, darling." Again he kissed her. "We must be married very soon."

She was trembling now; her eyes were bright with tears.

"Say that you love me," he insisted.

"I love you." The words came faintly, he could scarcely hear them.

His hands strayed delicately over her hair.

"And you'll marry me?"

"Oh, Paul—you must wait before I can tell you that!"

Now it was Ian Frazer's stern fair face that rose up before her, accusing, condemning.

"I'll wait as long as you like. But . . . have pity on me, Jill!"

Why was she thinking of Ian Frazer now? Why did his face come like a troubling memory to disturb her happiness? He had told her sharp, unforgettable truths. Words came back to her mind: *"I went down to the potter's house and behold he wrought a work on the wheels. And the vessel that he made of clay was marred in the hand of the potter, so he made it again another vessel as seemed good to the potter to make it . . ."*

All her soul was in revolt now against that threatened shaping. Those hard lessons he had taught her were by no means forgotten, but she flung them deliberately aside. Yes, she would be Paul's wife. She loved him in a tender, grateful, half-sisterly fashion; she loved his devotion, his faithfulness. And she would not submit to being defrauded anew of her woman's rightful heritage of love and motherhood. As if to set a seal on this resolve she drew Paul's face gently towards her and kissed him. Surely there could be nothing wrong, nothing wicked, in this love. . . .

"You won't let anything come between us? Any foolish, insensate scruples?" he said, almost as if he were divining her thoughts. "You won't let anything part us?"

"Nothing—nothing," said Gillian.

He released her slowly, thoughtfully, gazing at the little colourless, charming face. Yes, she was beautiful, more beautiful than ever, and there was something alluring and interesting, too, in that wistful appealing look of hers. He kissed her jealously, remembering that Aylmer and Giacomo had once known the joys of her caress.

"Oh, Jill—how I wish you'd never been married—never been engaged to any one else!"

"Instead of which I've been engaged twice and married once." She was able to laugh now at his tragic tone.

"And did you really love them—those other two?"

"Yes—I'm quite sure at least that I loved Aylmer." She looked at him. "Paul, don't think about them. I mean to love you much, *much* more." She laughed in a soft fashion that touched him. "I can depend on you. You'll always care—you'll never leave me." Something of the pain of those past desertions informed her speech.

Paul lifted her hands to his lips and kissed them almost reverently.

"Yes; you can depend upon me," he said slowly. "And, Jill—we are engaged now, aren't we? You will marry me when you are free?"

He was insistent, as if still fearful of losing her.

"Would you wait until next year? Paul—I'd so much rather not marry for a whole year after the divorce."

"If I must, I must," he said; "but why on earth do you want to wait?"

"Because I'm quite sure it's wiser, Paul."

"But harder." His mouth was grim.

"After all, it's only a few months."

"It shall be as you wish," he said.

She felt tranquilly happy. She was forgetting Ian Frazer with his stern face and voice. She would forget him. She would remember only that Paul loved her, and that she was learning to love him, too. There was defiance in her very surrender, in her passive acceptance of this proffered destiny. Happiness should not for a third time elude her.

"I'm so glad I came back, Paul," she said at last.

"Are you? So am I."

"Isn't it strange—I find it so difficult to envisage

the future? I can't imagine myself just simply a happy woman living a commonplace ordinary life." She looked at him wistfully. "Reassure me, Paul. Tell me I shall be just that. . . ."

"You shall be happy," he said, "if it's in my power to make you so. As for a commonplace ordinary life—isn't that asking rather a lot of the high gods?"

"I suppose it is. . . ."

She was back there in the soft grey duskiness, the twilight gloom of San Francisco, kneeling in the shadows and praying for light—the light which when it came had been too sharp for her vision, the light that had burnt her, threatening to consume. She would only pray for little humble things in the future; the simplest joys that the poorest labourer's wife may know. . . .

Yet Ian Frazer would think she had no right to pray at all, because she had wilfully separated herself from God. She struggled to free herself from the tyranny of his teaching.

"Paul—you must teach me to forget everything. I'm young and I want to make a fresh start. . . ."

"We will make it together—next January," said Paul,

CHAPTER XX

LADY PALLANT was sitting at her bureau writing letters when her son walked unceremoniously into her sanctum a day or two later. She did not know he was in town, and therefore was not expecting a visit from him. He had given no notice of his coming, which was also unusual. And just because it was unusual, a slight slackening of the small courtesies she inexorably exacted from her grown-up son and daughter, she was displeased and felt, in addition, a vague, formless anxiety. This expressed itself in the slight irritation with which she now accosted him.

"Why, Paul, what on earth are you doing in town?"

Paul stooped and kissed her, nervously, perfunctorily.

"I wanted to see you on very particular business," he said shortly.

Now that he was face to face with his mother, a curious nervousness possessed him, and all his careful preparation seemed to slip away from him. It was not going to be easy, and he could remember none of the tactful prefaces that he had endeavoured to compose and memorise in the train on his way to town. He looked at her defiantly and said:

"I've come, in fact, to tell you that I'm engaged to Gillian Driscoll."

Lady Pallant was far too much astonished to speak. She felt for the moment as if she had been the victim of some physical violence. She was brought as if involuntarily to her feet. She towered above her son, who remained standing in front of her, silent and unmoving.

When at last the words came, they were passionate, tempestuous.

"You shall not marry her. I utterly refuse to allow such a disgraceful thing! When did you see her again?"

"I went down to Bath for Miss Stanway's funeral, as you know. Gillian was there. But it's nothing new, mother. I've been in love with Jill since I was a boy. I asked her to marry me before she went to Rome in the spring. She refused me then. She has accepted me now."

There was a dull triumph in his voice as of a man who, after long and hopeless waiting, has suddenly attained his heart's desire. His dark eyes blazed with excitement.

"You shall not marry her," Lady Pallant repeated; "if you disobey me in this, you shall never enter my house again. And I will never receive Mrs. Driscoll!"

"That must be, of course, as you wish, mother," said Paul, with weary indifference. "I really don't care much what happens as long as I can marry Jill. . . ."

"Don't be a fool, Paul," said his mother sharply. "You *do* care. It will injure your career—your social position. And in the future it will make a great difference to you in other ways."

"I don't care about money, if you mean that. Nor does Gillian. Besides, she's got heaps."

"She is a false intriguing woman. I wish I had never had her in my house. She is making a fool of you, Paul." Her voice rose in shrill crescendo. "You may depend this is what she's been aiming at all the time!"

Paul reddened. "I must ask you not to call her names," he said, "or I shall go out of this house and never enter it again." He set his lips. The

two faces were almost oddly alike at that moment, and both were grim with determination. "I am going to marry her. And she shall go nowhere where she is not honourably received and welcomed."

"She won't be either honoured or welcomed here," said Lady Pallant. "You know what I think about divorced people remarrying. Of course she wants to reinstate herself. She doesn't care for you the least bit in the world."

He was silent for a moment. Then:

"I'm very sorry, of course, you should take it like this. But as I said before it makes no earthly difference to our engagement. I only wish she would consent to being married next month, and get the business over."

"Perhaps you are not aware that Gillian got herself talked about—and very disagreeably talked about—with young Marchese della Meldola in Rome this spring?" said Lady Pallant, bracing herself for a counter-attack.

Paul winced. He had never heard the surname of his Italian rival before. It had never occurred to him to ask for information on the point, but now the very sound of it, its soft musical sound, filled him with a fierce destroying jealousy that made his heart sink and his throat close up.

"Oh, she's told me all about that foolish affair!" he said, trying to speak lightly.

He smiled, fearing lest she might perceive his wound. But Lady Pallant knew her son too well to be deceived.

"He threw her over directly he knew that she had a husband living—a fact which she never seems to have mentioned to him! She was seen everywhere with him—was out in his car morning, noon, and night!"

Paul wondered idly how she had obtained such exact information. It was almost as if she had purposely had Gillian's doings watched. . . .

He said abruptly: "She was free to do as she chose. If she made mistakes, we must remember that she is still very young—hardly older than Joan. I have perfect confidence in her discretion myself."

Oh, why had she permitted this man to come between them? Why had she consented to this engagement so quickly, so ill-advisedly? He felt through all his being the bitter humiliation to which she had been subjected by the della Meldola family.

"I am delighted to hear it," said Lady Pallant dryly; "I hope you may always retain this confidence in Gillian, for you will not have much else to console you. But all men would not be so complacent. You will change, of course—the Pallants always trample on their wives—I have no doubt when you are married you will also display this pleasing idiosyncrasy." It gave her a sense almost of pleasure to feel that this trampling awaited Gillian. "At any rate I am sure you will have every excuse for doing so. Women like Mrs. Driscoll deserve all they get."

Paul flushed. His temper was stirring. Her innuendoes pierced him like knives. There was a studied insult in every one of her intemperate words.

"Of course if you think her worth the sacrifice, marry her! I shall simply wash my hands of an undutiful son. You must choose between us."

Lady Pallant's face had grown dark red with rage.

"I have already chosen," said Paul firmly. "I'm never going to give her up. It's been difficult enough to win her consent." He set his lips.

Lady Pallant loved her son, and his words pierced her to the heart. She had always in secret loved

him far better than Joan. He was in many ways so much more like herself.

"From the day you marry her you shall never set foot inside my house. Until then, I suppose I must receive you. But I utterly refuse to receive Mrs. Driscoll. I hope you understand the position."

"Perfectly," said Paul. His eyes narrowed.

"I shall not permit Joan to see her, either."

"Very well, mother," he said. He was too proud to make any entreaty. His small slight figure was curiously erect and tense.

"I suppose Gillian accepted you now because she had failed elsewhere," she pursued with the pitilessness of a woman determined to wound; "she can't care for you at all—she wants only what you can give her—money and a home. I wonder you haven't more pride, when you remember how she has spent the interval since her divorce!"

"You shall not insult her!" His voice was scarcely raised, the words came cold and determined. "Remember that I love her—that you are speaking of my future wife!"

"You will find lots of people quite ready to criticise Mrs. Driscoll," she reminded him dryly.

"Not in my hearing," he said; "never to me."

Lady Pallant, with nervous fingers, tore up an envelope which was lying on the table, and flung the pieces into the waste-paper basket. The little action was significant, in that it betrayed her exasperation and agitation.

"Such a marriage which isn't a marriage at all," continued Lady Pallant, "can only spell disaster for you. And she has no right to sacrifice you—to allow you to act directly contrary to my wishes. She might at least have the grace to remember what she has owed to me in the past."

"You mean her marriage to Aylmer Driscoll?" said Paul bitterly; "if so she had better forget all about it!"

Before she had time to reply, the door opened and Joan came into the room. She looked willowy and slender in a soft white lace dress; on her head was a little blue hat that matched her eyes. She looked fresh, dainty, and pretty, and rather self-conscious. She was going to meet Captain Grant in the Park.

"Why, Paul," she said in a tone of surprise.

She went up to him and kissed him. Paul suffered the embrace, but he did not attempt to return it. He felt Joan's entry to be an intrusion, and her trailing soft manner irritated him. It was such a bad imitation of Gillian! . . .

"What's the matter?" said Joan. She looked from her mother's hectic and agitated countenance to Paul's white face that seemed to betray no emotion at all. Only his unusual pallor to-day was accentuated. Joan was perplexed. "What has happened?" she said, rather persistently.

"I won't have Joan know!" said Lady Pallant furiously.

"She'd better be told," said Paul tranquilly; "she'll have to know sooner or later."

"Leave the room at once, Joan," said her mother. "Do you hear me?"

She moved a step towards her, almost threateningly. Joan turned quickly towards the door.

"Don't go, Jo," said Paul, who was now almost beside himself with suppressed anger. He seized her arm and held it as if in a vice. "I mean you to hear. Don't be a little fool!" as Joan gave a cry of pain, "I'm not going to hurt you. You cry more easily than any baby," he continued in a tone of disgust, as Joan's facile tears began to flow, though more from terror than pain.

"Let her go at once, Paul. I forbid you to tell her!" said Lady Pallant.

His grip on his sister's arm tightened. She moaned, "Oh, do please let me go, Paul. You're hurting me. . . . Let me go. . . ."

"I won't hurt you if you'll stand still and not struggle in that insane way!" he said impatiently.

Joan was trembling and weeping with fear. She ceased to struggle, for his clutch was bruising her arm through the thin sleeve. She would soon be too dishevelled, too disfigured with crying, to go and meet Captain Grant. Paul's white face, with its blazing eyes, were close to hers; she felt that he was mocking at her, as he had done when they were both children, for her deplorable lack of pluck and spirit.

"Listen, Jo. I'm going to marry Jill Driscoll—that's what all the row's about! Mother's been saying things against her. She is never to be allowed inside the house again, nor shall I be when I have married her." He pelted out the words.

"*You? Jill?* Oh, Paul. . . ." Long as she had jealously suspected her brother's attachment to Mrs. Driscoll, she had never for a moment entertained the idea that Gillian could possibly return it. "Do you mean that she cares for you, Paul?"

The doubt in her voice was unflattering; she seemed to suggest, as his mother had done, that Gillian had promised to marry him from some worldly motive. And had she not all along shown hesitation? It was because there was on the face of it so much to support their theory that Paul actually flinched at his sister's words. He felt he did not care now whether he hurt her or not.

"I imagine she does," he answered dryly, "as she's promised to marry me. But when she knows

it will mean giving up the charms of your delightful society for ever, my dear Jo——!"

It was Joan's turn to flinch.

"When did you see her, Paul? When did she come back to England?" Joan's voice betrayed signs of distress.

"I saw her in Bath. She had very properly returned for her aunt's funeral."

"When is she coming to town?"

"I don't know," said Paul. "But it can't affect you—you won't be allowed to see her. She's taboo here!"

"Yes—you must please understand that, Joan," said Lady Pallant in a harsh commanding tone. "For the future you are not to see or correspond with Mrs. Driscoll. As she is bent on ruining your brother's life, I forbid any intercourse between you!"

"Oh, mother!" Joan's tears flowed afresh. "Oh, you can't mean that! Why, I've been looking forward so to seeing dear Jill again!"

"And when we're married you won't see or hear from dear Paul either." He mimicked her almost savagely. But he released his hold on her arm, and giving her a little push, said:

"There, you can go! Go up and cry in your room!"

Joan went sobbing towards the door. She felt as if she had been plunged suddenly and without warning into the midst of a most appalling nightmare. At the door she paused for a moment, and then turning she ran back to Paul crying, as she tried unsuccessfully to kiss him,

"Oh, I shall lose you both—I shall lose you both!"

There was anguish in her tone.

"There—for goodness' sake don't slobber me," said Paul, pushing her away not unkindly.

When the door closed upon Joan, Lady Pallant sank exhausted into a chair. Paul still stood there in the same inflexible attitude.

"Is this your last word, mother?" he said coldly.

"Yes," she answered harshly. "You have behaved disgracefully, you have shown yourself to be a most undutiful son. I will never receive this woman who has entrapped you. I will never acknowledge her. I have suspected the existence of an understanding between you ever since she dined here that night last winter and you drove back with her. You have been a weak fool, Paul, to allow yourself to be caught by an artful, designing woman."

Paul, without replying, moved to the door, opened it and left the room noiselessly. He went downstairs and straight out of the house. Joan from her bedroom window watched him as he went down the street, his small slight soldierly figure erect and upright. At the sight of him her tears flowed afresh. She had given up all thought of keeping her appointment with Captain Grant.

CHAPTER XXI

AUNT LETTY was a little uncertain at first how to treat the matter of Gillian's engagement, the announcement of which was conveyed to her as a profound secret that same evening, after Paul had reluctantly left the house in Brock Street. It was on occasions such as these, when unable to decide for herself what attitude she ought to adopt, that she sorely missed the firm but guiding hand of Miss Matty. Very deeply and sincerely did Miss Letty mourn the lack of that restraining hand. She had too long been as a slave to a despot to find any solace in the prospect of freedom and liberty.

She could, however, remember with some consolation a discussion they had had with Mr. Davis, the vicar of the church to which the sisters Stanway always migrated on Sunday, although it was at a most inconvenient distance from Brock Street, just after Gillian had obtained a divorce. He had held what seemed to them the very just view that Gillian being perfectly innocent had every right to marry again should occasion present itself. Mr. Davis had even laughingly offered to perform the ceremony should it be found convenient to have it in Bath. Remembering this, Miss Letty was able conscientiously though timidly to offer her congratulations to Gillian, only protesting that it was "perhaps a little soon for her to think of marrying again." Did not widows invariably wait a year to satisfy *les convenances*? She thought Paul had shown almost a want of delicacy in approaching Gillian so soon—and on the very day of darling Matty's funeral too . . . before even that dreadful decree had been made absolute.

"It won't be till January in any case," said Gil-

lian, who had been dreading a sentimental outburst and almost welcomed the mild reproof that had been offered instead. "And I shall probably go abroad again in the interval, as we want to keep it a secret for the present so as to avoid gossip."

"Oh, I hoped you would stay with me for a little," said Aunt Letty. "You see, I've never been alone, and I shall miss dear Matty so sorely."

Gillian stretched out her little white hand and touched Miss Letty's wrinkled yellow one.

"Oh well, I shan't leave you I hope for a week or two. I wish you would go away for a change yourself, Aunt Letty. You must be sick of being always here, aren't you?"

Miss Letty looked mildly shocked.

"My dear Gillian—I should not dream of going away now. I have all dear Matty's papers to go through and a hundred things to arrange. And I am never so comfortable when I am away as I am at home. And now Matty's gone there's no one else to look after things. . . ."

She glanced reproachfully at Gillian.

"And when you are married I hope you will settle down and not always be rushing off abroad. Dear Matty used to say that this deplorable restlessness was one of the curses of the day! A woman's place is in her home. I am sure Mr. Pallant will tell you the same thing."

She evidently considered that she had inherited from her sister the right to give Gillian good advice and counsel. In the eyes of Miss Letty, Gillian was still the little girl they had brought up almost from babyhood. And as a little girl she had required a good deal of very firm guidance at the hands of Miss Matty. She had by no means always been easy to manage, and it was quite possible that she still required advice, for she was in a very

lonely position. Gillian accepted the counsel without remonstrance. She wondered idly if she had always found her aunts so trying in the old days when her home had been with them. But memory did not serve her too well. She could only recall that she had been a little afraid of Aunt Matty, and that she had looked to Aunt Letty for sympathy and comfort when the tyranny of the elder Miss Stanway had been more than usually severe. Everything belonging to that period seemed to form part of another life; she could not reconstruct it even in imagination.

"I dare say as you are engaged to her son you will be going up to stay with Janet soon," said Miss Letty, encouraged by the success of her mild rebuke since it had provoked no answer.

"Oh, that would be very unlikely," said Gillian with decision. "Paul knows exactly what his mother's views on the subject are. I don't expect she will even receive me." Two pink spots showed in her cheeks. Yes, the very first snub would undoubtedly emanate from Lady Pallant, and all her little world would speedily follow suit.

"Oh, my dear, how shocking!" exclaimed Miss Letty. "I hardly think you ought to be a party to that young man disobeying his mother—going against her wishes—in such an important matter as his marriage!"

Miss Letty was genuinely disturbed. She began even to doubt gravely the comfortable reassurances offered by the Rev. Josiah Davis.

"I'm not at all sure that it would be right for you to marry him under the circumstances, my dear Gillian," she added.

"Paul has quite made up his mind to go against his mother if she opposes our marriage. He will be very sorry, of course, but it can't be helped." Her

face hardened a little. "Don't let us talk about it, Aunt Letty. It will be quite disagreeable enough when the time comes, and I am so tired of disagreeable situations. I seem to have had nothing else for months past."

"But it might be your duty to break off your engagement," said Miss Letty, who now definitely felt that the mantle of her elder sister had fallen upon her. She spoke with quite unusual decision, for she felt convinced that it was thus dear Matty would have spoken under the circumstances. And then, of course, dear Matty, who had had such courage, would have sent for Paul and remonstrated with him, and given him a liberal application of the First Commandment with Promise.

"I'm not going to break off my engagement," said Gillian coldly.

"I feel somehow as if the marriage wouldn't be blessed unless Janet approved," murmured Miss Letty.

Gillian rose from her seat.

"I'm tired, Aunt Letty. I find love-affairs dreadfully fatiguing. I think I will go up to my room if you will excuse me." She stooped and kissed her aunt's withered cheek exactly as she had done when she was a little girl. Almost instinctively she turned towards the chair which had always been occupied by the grim and angular form of Martha Stanway, as if to bestow upon her the conventional good-night embrace.

She went upstairs, feeling strangely depressed. All sense of elation had curiously enough left her, and she felt almost too tired to experience any satisfaction in her engagement. She thought that she hated Brock Street; it was so dull, so narrow. And Aunt Letty had irritated her to-night.

She slept badly, tossing from side to side. She

could remember how she had lain awake the first night after her engagement to Aylmer, grudging the hours to sleep that could be so much more profitably employed in thinking of him and recalling his tender words, his kisses. No emotion of the kind filled her heart now. She was almost glad to think that Paul was obliged to leave Bath by a night train in order to return to Aldershot. She would not have to see him again just yet—not in fact until he had had that momentous interview with his mother. Towards morning she fell asleep, and she did not wake until the maid brought in her tea with some letters lying on the tray. On the top envelope there was an Italian stamp. She took it up curiously and saw that the address was written in Ian Frazer's writing; it had been forwarded from the hotel at Assisi.

Her first feeling was one of anger that he should have thus written to her. She drank her tea and looked at all her other letters before she opened his. It was not very long and began by expressing a conventional regret that he had not seen her before her sudden departure. He had called at the hotel that same day and found that she had gone. At the end he added: "I was sorry that you had to leave like this. It struck me once or twice lately that Assisi was beginning to teach you certain things. I know that this is one of the places of the world where the atmosphere is most likely to impress very profoundly a sensitive person. How far you have progressed I do not know, but I hope that now you will be less inclined to take any definite dangerous step that might imperil your spiritual future. For this I shall always pray. . . ."

Any definite dangerous step? . . . As she read those words Gillian let the letter drop from her hand. It was almost terrible that she should have

had to read them now, when only a few hours ago she had promised to take just the step that Ian Frazer had feared. A whole flood of memories seemed to overwhelm and possess her mind. She remembered that long walk she had taken with Ian when he had spoken to her with such passionate earnestness. She remembered, too, that powerfully held by the spell of his words she had gone into the Lower Church to pray. All this time she had tried to put that remembrance resolutely from her mind, but now it was not possible to do so any more. It was too strong, it would not be gainsaid; for the moment it held her in its grip. She remembered how that strange and almost blinding illumination had fallen upon her, overwhelming her. Vaguely she had heard of supernatural graces which brought to the questing soul divine guidance, and she knew that in that mystical hour her own soul had thus definitely received such guidance. Utterly and physically exhausted, she had emerged from it vanquished, and for the time humbly submissive. But the effects of the experience had not lasted; she had determined deliberately that they should not last. She would not yield her body and her soul to that new shaping. She had defied the Hand that would have fashioned her anew. But she had always been conscious of it ever since, of its nearness, its power, its intention. And most of all had she been acutely aware of it in the hour when she had promised to marry Paul Pallant. Her rebellion had been premeditated and intentional.

And now Ian Frazer's letter had awakened within her something that was stronger than a scruple. She felt actually afraid, and as it were physically afraid. Ian's fine fair face, with its piercing blue eyes, rose up before her. A man who had not loved her, and yet who had exhibited this passionate, personal in-

terest in her "spiritual future." He was afraid for her. He wished at all costs to save her from a peril she could hardly estimate, and which was even more terrible in its nebulous formlessness than any concrete and defined danger could possibly have been. As she realised this fact she turned a little cold and faint. Vaguely she remembered some such sentence as this: "*Lest haply we be fighting against God.*" She had had that moment of mystic illumination, and she had recovered from the overwhelming power of it only to fight against it and defy it. In the very face of it she had promised to be Paul Pallant's wife. . . .

At that moment she felt acutely, profoundly miserable. The whole atmosphere of Assisi seemed to surround her and envelop her. She saw the pitiless face of Ian Frazer; she heard his voice uttering harsh and cruel warnings. All her scruples were revived a thousandfold. She found herself saying aloud, almost mechanically, "I won't marry Paul—I can't marry him. When I explain things to him he will surely understand."

Her first action on rising was to scribble a little hurried note to Paul. "Don't come down here yet," she wrote, "I am disturbed and worried about something. I will write directly I can see you. I am afraid we have arranged everything too hastily. You must remember that I am not even technically free." She folded the letter, enclosed it in an envelope and rang for the maid to post it. The little precipitate action soothed her. It was a satisfaction to have accomplished something, however small. Paul must know that she was again hesitating, again vacillating. Perhaps he would think that she was capricious and changeable. But as she examined her heart she knew that she was prompted by something much stronger than mere

caprice. She had accepted Paul deliberately in a moment of rebellion, and now Ian Frazer's letter had brought back most vividly and clearly to her mind the lesson she had learned at Assisi. Already she was beginning to see that her engagement was bringing her neither the peace nor the happiness she expected. Would she be haunted always—all through her marriage—with this intolerable thought that she was fighting against the Divine Will? . . .

Of course, it was absurd to suppose that Paul could be kept away from Bath indefinitely. He telegraphed on two successive days to know if she would receive him, but on the third day, after the interview with his mother, he appeared at Brock Street late in the afternoon without warning. He was getting by this time acutely anxious, and he felt that he must know the worst. Something was evidently at work with Gillian, some ulterior influence hostile to himself and to which he had no clue. Gillian had never mentioned Ian Frazer's name to him. She had always felt that it would be impossible for her to utter it with confident indifference, so greatly did his opinions obsess her. She had purposely spoken very little to Paul about the weeks she had spent in Assisi. Obviously he was not interested at all in her Italian sojourn, and the very mention of Giacomo filled him with acute jealousy; it would be unnecessary therefore to tell him how profoundly another man—a mere passing stranger—had influenced her. . . .

The two hours' journey to Bath had never seemed so long to Paul as it did that hot July afternoon. He scarcely bestowed a glance upon the beautiful, peaceful, typically English scenery through which the train was passing. The Thames was a clear, silver-blue ribbon twisting between banks that

were exquisitely wooded and then between fields filled with the ripening harvest. Reading was passed, and the train made swift passage through the lovely river-places of Basildon, Pangbourne, and Goring. But his thoughts were too full of Gillian for him to be able to concentrate his attention elsewhere. What did this new attitude of hers signify? Did she intend even now to break off their brief engagement? With dismay he recalled her words of the other night: "You see, I learned what a strong force it must be that could thus separate Giacomo from me when we were so happy, when we loved each other so much. . . ." And again: "It made me ask myself what this Church was that could dominate even a man's love. . . ." And in those words, although he was still unaware of it, there lay the clue to Gillian's hesitation, Gillian's vacillation. But the remembrance of them sufficed to fill him with a vague alarm.

Or was it only that disastrous past life of hers that had scourged her into this cold prudence? It seemed to him as if she had learned from those two experiences of hers to look at love dubiously and askance, suspiciously measuring its durability. But must he, Paul, suffer because Aylmer and Giacomo had each in turn proved perfidious? He tried to think that this thought lay at the root of her present mood, but in his heart he felt that this was only one of many things that influenced Gillian just now. It was not only because she greatly feared and greatly doubted that she wavered. There was something deeper than that, something that sprang from a more vital source. It was the sense that marriage for a woman in her position was not only a mistake but a sin. He perceived that this scruple had been deepened rather than weakened by her sojourn in Italy. There was that

engagement of hers—the passing idle folly of a lonely, unoccupied woman, Paul was learning to call it to himself—which she appeared to have entered into almost as readily and easily as her first. Yet in spite of his endeavour to explain it to himself in this way it was the thought of that engagement that turned Paul's heart to a wilderness of cold, jealous fear. This man had evidently possessed something in which he himself must be pitifully lacking since he had been able to pin Gillian down to a definite engagement with the very month of their marriage, the venue of their honeymoon, duly fixed. Giacomo must have possessed, in fact, the power to persuade Gillian. Had she loved him? She had admitted that she had loved the things he could offer her, of love and wealth and position and a new life, away from all ancient and painful associations. She had promised to marry him after what must have necessarily been an extremely slight acquaintance. Paul grit his teeth. He could, he must, envisage this fact. She had been ready to become this man's wife, she had, for a time, cast aside all her scruples.

And from that second shipwreck, less disastrous, less painful, but even perhaps more humiliating than the first, Gillian had emerged with her misgivings unaccountably intensified. It was the very force that had flung her to the ground, the very lash of the whip that had struck her, that had made her pause to inquire into their justice and authority. And it was because the pain had been so sudden and severe in those mental sufferings of hers, with love and pride alike wounded to the death in the adventure, that she had been provoked to a bitter examination and analysis of her wound, to find out for herself what necessity, what reason there had been for the hand she had loved to inflict it summarily and without warning upon her. . . . Dimly as Paul could

realise something of the train of events that made it ten times more difficult for him to win Gillian now than before she had left England, he was not yet in possession of all the facts; he had not the clue which lay in the words of Ian Frazer. . . .

He felt that he would have shielded her from all pain, could he have won her promise before she went away. He longed now to make her his wife and chance the rest, protecting her with arms that desired only to clasp and shelter her from the storms of the whole world, from any recurring advance of bitter salt waves. . . . Where had he failed? Not in love surely, since his love had been all Gillian's since she had first come a timid, shy girl to his mother's house. His love was ten thousand times greater and deeper and more sincere than any that Giacomo della Meldola could have offered to her. It was so great that it could never have inflicted any pain upon her. Once having won her he would have clung to his treasure in defiance of the whole world, as indeed he was now prepared to cling in defiance of his mother. Gillian, when she heard the terms of Lady Pallant and his own acquiescence in them, must see for herself that his love had an absolutely different quality from any that had hitherto been offered her, from any that Aylmer or Giacomo could ever have given her. Only . . . why did she seem so ready to set his claim aside? Why was she still so hesitating, so evasive? . . .

Gillian was not in the drawing-room when he was shown into that bleak Victorian apartment with its formal arrangement of chairs, tables, cabinets, and pictures. Miss Letty, of course, had changed nothing since her sister's death. It spoke volumes for the enduring tyranny of Miss Matty that Miss Letty would have considered it disloyal to alter the position of a single china ornament.

He stood there staring at its discomfort—an ordered Spartan discomfort that was singularly expressive of the elder Miss Stanway. The very chairs seemed to forbid you at your peril to take a moment's slothful ease on their hard seats. There was something repellant in that perfect symmetry with which the pictures were hung upon the walls. It was a room that boldly challenged all modern and luxurious tendencies.

Gillian did not keep him waiting long. When she came into the room looking more slight and elusive than ever in her thin black dress, she held out her hand to him almost without speaking. He could not truthfully assure himself that she looked in the least pleased to see him. It was something that had to be done, got through, an inevitable turn of the wheel. She made him feel desperately timid. He was afraid to speak, afraid to utter a single one of those carefully prepared speeches destined to show her that Lady Pallant's word weighed not at all in the ultimate balancing of the scales.

"You didn't tell me you were coming?" said Gillian in a cold, weary voice. The touch of his hand had made her heart beat, had made the pendulum swing back in his favour.

"I didn't want to be stopped again," he answered abruptly; "you see, I haven't much leave, and I wanted to see you and tell you about my mother."

"When did you see her?" inquired Gillian, with a slight access of curiosity.

"This morning."

"Only then? I suppose she is horrified?"

Gillian was again temporising with herself. She was certainly going to marry Paul, but she must have a little time in which to get accustomed to the idea. She had, too, to strike a bargain with him and she knew that to both of them it would prove

a hard one. She intended to make the condition that between now and January she was to have perfect liberty of action and absolute freedom. She intended to spend the whole time abroad. To begin an engagement in this way did not perhaps argue any great enthusiasm or intensity of feeling. But she wished to be able to go where she liked without harassing arguments or discussions. She could not spend the six months of her engagement in disgrace, as it were, in England. And she was sure of her feeling for Paul. It was love without romance—the only kind she now assured herself which could endure. The condition would not be an altogether easy one for herself. But she wished at all costs to avoid gossip.

"Oh," he said suddenly, "what have you got to tell me, Jill? You don't know how your letter frightened me. . . ."

She met his look straightly.

"What do you want me to say?"

Perhaps her voice softened involuntarily, at any rate there was something in her answer to break down the barriers, to bring him with a swift suddenness to her side. Now her hands were in his, and he was covering them with kisses. Soon she knew that she would feel his lips on hers. She shrank a little away from him. The moment was beautiful; it seemed to chase away all her terrors and misgivings; it stirred her heart to a new tenderness. She thrilled under his embrace, and wondered if her love for him were as destitute of romance as she had supposed. She stroked back the black hair from his brow.

"I want you to tell me that you love me—that you will marry me. You've made me *suffer*, Gillian. . . ."

His face was white, tormented. She thought if

she had not loved him that look of tormented misery in his face would have tempted her to prevaricate and say that she did.

"All that?" she said, and smiled at him as if he had been a little unhappy child.

"Jill . . . Jill," said Paul. He took her in his arms.

"Now tell me about Cousin Janet," she said presently.

"Oh well, it's just as I thought. She won't receive you—she says when we are married I'm never to enter the house again. And I really think she means it. She's most awfully sick about the whole thing. And Joan isn't to see you or write to you. Poor girl—when she heard that she ran howling out of the room saying something about never seeing her dear Jill again."

"Poor Joan," said Gillian. "Isn't she engaged yet?"

"Not yet—she can't get used to his red hair. I admit I don't care for his fuzzy pink wig myself."

"Tell me more, Paul," said Gillian.

"Oh, I don't want to talk about it. It was a beastly row—I haven't got over it yet."

"I shall hate feeling in disgrace . . . especially with your mother. If she'd only stood by us we could have endured other people's snubs so much better."

"Why should there be snubs?"

"Because . . . there's Aylmer. . . ."

"Oh, Jill dear—let's forget him!"

"We shall never be allowed to."

"Look here," he said masterfully, "we are going to do this deliberately, you and I. So we won't whine about the snubs. They can't, can't, *can't* hurt us. . . ."

His words seemed to reassure her. How foolish

she had been to allow herself to fall even temporarily again under the influence of Ian Frazer—a man she cared nothing at all about.

"And we are engaged, aren't we?" he went on, "there's to be no more foolish talk about breaking it off. . . ."

For answer she bent down and lightly kissed his forehead.

"Yes, Paul, if you really wish it we will be engaged. Only I wish Cousin Janet approved. I'm sorry you'll lose so much by marrying me."

"If you marry me I shall gain everything in the world I care about!" he told her passionately.

"But even that doesn't seem right. After all, your mother has claims. We can't cut ourselves adrift altogether from the past."

"Life isn't a harmonious whole," said Paul; "we gain something here and we almost invariably lose something there to balance it. It is often only a patchwork of ugly seams." He spoke bitterly, for his mother's words had wounded him more deeply than he had thought possible; he had seemed to see in her hostile attitude the one which the majority of people would adopt towards Gillian.

"I used to think," she said softly, "that life was beautiful or not as we chose to make it."

"The ugly things aren't always our own fault. I sometimes think they would be easier to bear if they were!"

He was thinking of Aylmer, of Giacomo. . . .

"But often they are," she said.

"Our marriage," he said, "must be beautiful."

"We must try and make it so." Her face hardened a little.

He held her again, kissing her. She was beginning to sense the protective shielding quality of his love; it seemed to turn her very heart to softness,

to break up all the hard places. She was glad that Giacomo had broken off their engagement to leave her free to marry Paul. Out of that past pain had been born this wonderful happiness. After all, was it so necessary that they should be so completely separated? Why did her brain turn traitor and impose this hard condition? Why did she feel constrained to act with a prudence that was cold, brutal, almost unwomanly.

Her heart told her that she wished to be near Paul so that she might see him as often as possible, until she could be with him altogether. She wanted to taste the full savour of their present happiness. And his presence served most powerfully to dispel those fears and scruples that obsessed her in idle hours, and that even sometimes threatened to gain the upper hand over her. Was she to live through all those months that lay ahead seldom seeing him or feeling his kiss? The thought of that coming separation, of which he as yet knew nothing, made her more tender and gentle to him now. He should have that remembrance of her at least to comfort and sustain him.

Of course he would not take it well. He would argue that they would have plenty to endure and suffer without adding gratuitously to its sum and measure. Why should she inflict needless misery upon them both? Why couldn't she live somewhere in the country in a quiet place where he could come and see her? Or—stay in Bath with Aunt Letty? And when she did reveal her intention, little by little, almost timidly, as if to try and soften it for him, his fierce and angry arguments took the precise line her imagination had indicated. Then, finding these fail, he fell back upon the bitter assertion that she didn't love him, that she could not possibly ever have loved him since she was capable of evol-

ing such a scheme expressly to make him miserable! His final furious outcry was the demand:

"If you were so ready to marry this—this *Italian* in October, why can't you be ready to marry me then?"

She had not expected this attack; it fell upon her like a blow. It was as if Paul were demanding whether she alone possessed the right to inflict pain. She had no answer ready.

"Weren't you planning—as you yourself said—to spend your honeymoon at Frascati in October?"

He was beside himself with jealous anger. Gillian felt almost afraid of him.

"What made you promise him so much and me so little?"

"Oh, don't let us quarrel, Paul. It would have been so different marrying abroad, away from every one. I do want to avoid unnecessary gossip."

"And are there no gossips in Rome?" he demanded angrily.

"Yes, but they didn't know me. Here we simply can't be married before January. Then the year will be up."

"You're bent on killing me," he said; "I can't bear it, Jill. I've borne enough all these long months of silence. I can't go back to it, and if you cared at all for me you would not wish me to."

His face wore a white, bleak look that hurt her.

"But it won't be silence, Paul dear. I shall write—ever so often, every day if you like. Only you must let me have my way. It's the only condition on which I can be engaged to you. If it's too hard for you you must take the alternative and let us be as we were—not engaged."

"Between you and my mother I shall have a nice time," he groaned.

"It's only six months, Paul."

Again she pushed back his smooth, strong hair with that caressing, comforting, beautiful gesture of hers. . . .

"When do you mean to go?" he asked. "I can get leave before the manœuvres. If you were in town then we could see each other."

"Yes, I'll do that, Paul. Then I will leave early in August. I am sure the six months will pass very quickly."

He still looked sceptical.

"You are sure—quite sure—that you love me, Jill?" he asked.

"So sure that it hurts me to do what I know will be best for us both."

"If it hurt you as it hurts me you wouldn't do it," he said.

"I wonder," she answered quietly.

His anger had subsided; he looked crestfallen and miserable. Aware of something that he considered capricious and changeable in Gillian's disposition, the condition she had offered him as well as its suggested alternative had filled him with an icy fear that seemed actually to impair for the moment his vitality, his physical strength. She dominated him, and if there were a way of dominating her he did not know it. He told himself that he had to surrender and submit because a man who is in love will submit almost to anything. He could run no risk of losing her by any further setting forth of his own claim, his own point of view. . . .

CHAPTER XXII

MISS LETTY demurred a little when Gillian first suggested that Paul was hoping she might invite him to spend a week-end in Brock Street before she herself went to London. The engagement was a profound secret, and it was highly necessary that it should remain one. Although the decree absolute had now been pronounced it would cause a great deal of gossip and scandal if the news of Gillian's engagement leaked out prematurely. Apart from this more serious aspect of the case, Miss Stanway was mildly flustered at the thought of entertaining him; she had a nervous fear of those whom she was wont to designate as "smart London people," and the very fact that Paul was an officer in a cavalry regiment increased her alarm. Gillian knew that the little house offered no luxuries. It was still exactly as Miss Letty's father and mother—Gillian's own grandparents—had left it. Miss Stanway intimated that what had been good enough for them was good enough for herself, but one could not expect young men of the present day, brought up to every kind of luxury and comfort, to hold the same views.

"Oh, Paul has very simple tastes. He will be perfectly happy," said Gillian. She almost added that in this respect he did not resemble Aylmer, who after the first experience of it had refused to submit himself to the Spartan régime of Brock Street; but she felt that the mention of Aylmer might still further perturb her aunt.

"But, my dear, people are sure to talk. It will never do." Miss Letty had a wholesome fear of gossip.

"No one need know he's here. We are in such

deep mourning, and then every one knows the Palants are our cousins," said Gillian.

In the end she won her point, though not until after Miss Letty had most diligently searched her own heart to try and discover what her sister's wishes on the subject would have been. It was impossible, however, for her to come to any definite decision upon this point. Miss Matty had always been rather severe than indulgent towards Gillian; had even thought it necessary to deprive her of quite harmless pleasures as a matter of "discipline." But now that she was a grown woman—a married woman—(Miss Letty cherished a respect almost amounting to reverence for the married state), it was impossible to deny her anything for such a reason; even Miss Matty would not have adopted such a course. She would have been compelled to judge the case on its own merits. Miss Letty finally gave a timid consent, and Paul was forthwith invited.

The two spent much of their time on the river. The hot weather had driven many of the inhabitants of Bath to the seaside, and Miss Letty was glad to think that scarcely a single one of her own friends remained in the city. If, therefore, she had been guilty of an imprudence in inviting Paul, no one would witness or condemn that imprudence.

Bright burning July days characterised that week-end Paul spent in Bath. Of the Spartan conditions obtaining in Brock Street he never retained any significant remembrance. The cuisine which had repelled Aylmer was unnoticed by him. He was with Gillian, under the same roof, and it would have been churlish to the gods who had granted so much and so splendidly to criticise that roof. . . .

The Avon winding between its twin rows of pollard willows, with the distant prospect of green woods and hills faintly lilac-coloured in the summer

haze, was well known to Gillian Driscoll from her girlhood days. She was very happy during those hours they spent there, with Paul sitting opposite to her lazily rowing the light boat. His shirt-sleeves rolled back beyond the elbows, revealed his lean and muscular brown arms. She liked to watch the measured rhythmic movements of those arms. She herself undertook to steer the boat, but performed this task indifferently and negligently, for her mind was preoccupied with the thought of Paul. She felt that she had fallen upon a little oasis of ineffable peace, welcome as the sight of a well with palms must prove to the weary Saharan traveller. It was a peace so perfect that one did not stop to analyse it, nor even pause to call it joy; it was like an atmosphere that enveloped her after fierce storms. She thought she was more perfectly and more tranquilly happy than she had ever been in her life before. She had no fears for the future. She could picture herself going hand in hand with Paul, through all the days, through all the years . . . glad and sad. . . . What could gladness and sadness matter, so only they were together?

"Oh, Paul, isn't it deliciously peaceful?" she said one golden evening when he rowed the boat under the deep shade of the willows and paused contemplating her.

He nodded his head in assent. Then he shipped his oars and leaned his chin on his brown hands, looking up into her face.

It was very silent there. Across the placid river the sun was trailing a path of primrose-coloured light which made the shadows seem by contrast more deep and definite. Rows of pink ragged robins and clusters of blue forget-me-nots made soft blots of delicate colour along the banks that were clothed with long, green grasses blown back by the

wind. Swallows flew overhead. In the distance they could hear the murmur of children's voices and laughter. But they themselves seemed to be plunged suddenly into a remote, uninhabited world, alone together in a beautiful and unimagined solitude.

"Up till now I have been almost afraid of happiness," said Gillian.

"And now?" He looked at her smiling. His own attitude towards life was simple and straightforward, but there was always something complicated about Gillian which often baffled but always delighted him.

"I am not afraid any more. You have brought peace to my heart, Paul."

Yet even as she spoke she wondered if he had destroyed or only stilled as with some powerful anodyne those fears and scruples that had once held her. . . .

It was not often that she ventured to utter any unprovoked sentimental speech to Paul, but he accepted it quite simply.

"I'm glad at least to have done that, dear Jill. . . ."

Gillian had taken off her hat—a large shady one of black tulle with a single black rose—and a sunbeam dribbling through the boughs touched her dark hair to unsuspected gold. Paul thought she looked both thin and fragile in her black dress; he was not sure that black suited her too well, and he wished that she had not been obliged to wear mourning now in the first days of their engagement. Her face was very calm, and wore a simple almost girlish expression of contentment, and it seemed to him that her eyes were less sad.

"I feel that nothing can ever come between us and our happiness," she added, after a moment's pause.

"Ah," he said abruptly, "don't challenge fate like that, my dear Jill! I am not superstitious . . . but I feel as if the whole world were engaged in a vast conspiracy to rob us of our happiness. I wish you could be locked up in a tower like the princess in the fairy tale until January comes."

Gillian shivered a little. His mood of unreasoning fear communicated itself to her and something of the brightness of the day seemed to have diminished under it. She said, trying to speak lightly:

"But even that didn't save her from her fate, Paul."

She wondered why he should have these misgivings while she herself had come to feel so strangely assured of their future happiness.

He rose gingerly, stood for a moment balancing himself, then made two cautious steps towards her. She felt his arms round her and closed her eyes to feel his lips touching hers. They were alone in the world—she and Paul. Only the willows watched them and whispered the secret softly to each other.

At last he said with an effort:

"If you still decide to wait until January I shall take second leave this year. It begins about Christmas. We could be married in the first days of January, and go straight to the South of France."

He waited for her answer.

As she did not speak he added almost violently:

"That'll be giving fate five months and a half in which to do her worst!"

"Why are you so afraid of waiting, Paul?"

"I don't know. But I *am* afraid. . . ."

"I think we might be married in the first days of January," she said. "You'll see then how foolish—how unnecessarily anxious—you have been."

CHAPTER XXIII

EARLY in the following week Gillian went to town. She stayed at a quiet hotel in Mayfair, making no immediate plans for departure although she intended vaguely to start for Switzerland in about ten days, and remain there for a few weeks before going on to Italy.

Paul was to be in town for a few days before the annual manœuvres; he had put in for leave, and thus they would be able to see a little of each other, since Miss Letty was rather averse to repeating the somewhat hazardous experiment of inviting him to Brock Street. His first visit had passed off almost unnoticed, but a repetition might cause comment. In the face of this attack of prudence Gillian evolved the scheme of going to town. She was encouraged in this by the fact that Lady Pallant had already left for Scotland with Joan, and the house in Belgrave Square was closed. There was, therefore, no chance of meeting her. Paul intended to stay at his club.

In Central Europe the cloud, no bigger than a man's hand, had already gathered. . . .

Gillian had a few days alone before Paul could get away. She enjoyed the solitude after those weeks of Miss Letty's exhausting conversation. She felt rather averse, too, to seeking out any of her old friends. She seemed a stranger in this London world where once she had been so well known.

One evening when she had gone out for a little walk she suddenly encountered Amaryllis Porter, coming from the direction of the Park and accompanied by a handsome sunburnt young man whom she immediately introduced as Captain Sprot.

"My dear Jill—I'd no idea you were back in England. When did you leave Assisi?"

"Oh, ages ago," said Gillian. "My aunt died and I came back for her funeral. I've been staying in Bath."

"Our wedding is fixed for Thursday fortnight," said Amaryllis. "I'll send you a card. You must be sure and come. The reception is to be at the Hyde Park Hotel."

"Oh, I'll come to the church, not to the reception," said Gillian quickly. "It might hurt Aunt Letty's feelings." She glanced at her black dress.

"Very well, just as you like, as long as you do come," said Amaryllis. "By the way, I must come and have a long talk with you—without Hengist." She glanced at him with a frank smile.

"Come to tea to-morrow then," said Gillian; "perhaps Captain Sprot will look in later."

The young man smiled. "I shall be delighted," he said.

He had a pleasant, open, frank face with keen blue eyes and a charming smile. Tall as he was, there could scarcely have been half an inch between them.

Amaryllis appeared punctually on the following day. She was full of her wedding, of her presents and her trousseau; of the hours she had spent at the dressmaker's, and of Mrs. Porter's collapse under the strain of it.

"But she's sure to buck up all right when the day comes," said Miss Porter with unimpaired cheerfulness. "We're going to have a long honeymoon as Hengist doesn't have to be back in Egypt until the end of September. We shall go north and spend most of the time playing golf."

Gillian leaned her chin on her hand and looked at Amaryllis almost wistfully. The future seemed to her so clear, so serene and straightforward, just as her own had promised to be in the days when she was engaged to Aylmer Driscoll.

She said impulsively:

"I've got something to tell you, Ammy. But it's a great secret. You must promise you won't tell any one, even Captain Sprot."

"Of course I promise," said Amaryllis easily; "what is it, Jill? It isn't anything bad, is it?" she added, suddenly realising that Gillian was looking both unhappy and perplexed.

"Oh no, it isn't bad, Ammy." But her smile even now was not altogether successful. "I'm going to be married again."

"Married? Well, that is good news, Jill! Who is it? Any one I know?"

"I'm going to marry my cousin, Paul Pallant," said Gillian gravely. "We don't want any one to know till much nearer the time. His mother is very angry about it—she won't receive me."

She had the feeling that in some way Amaryllis would help to dispel some of her own doubts and difficulties which always sprang up in such abundance whenever Paul was absent.

"What beastly hard lines!" said Miss Porter sympathetically. "However, I hope you're not bothering your head about that, Jill. I always said that she was a cantanky old woman!"

She rose and bestowed upon Gillian two smacking kisses, one on each cheek. "I'm most awfully glad to hear the news," she said heartily. "I hope you're going to be married soon."

"Oh, certainly not before January," said Gillian. "I told Paul that I thought we ought to wait until the year is up."

"Don't wait," said Amaryllis; "why, you might both be dead! Six months is an awful age. . . . And whose feelings do you want to spare? Not Aylmer's surely?"

"The world's," said Mrs. Driscoll, who was

already beginning to feel braced by her friend's bright, normal, and wholesome manner of looking at things. She was deriving the precise kind of comfort she had hoped for from her.

Amaryllis gave a snort of contempt.

"I don't care *that* for the world!" she said, snapping her long sunburnt fingers with the happy air of one who has never felt the sting of malicious tongues; "what does Mr. Pallant say?"

"Of course he wants it to be sooner. But then, men always want to get married directly, when they are once engaged," said Gillian.

"Well, I think myself his scheme's the sound one! Get married—you will be ever so much happier than hanging round waiting for six months."

"I shan't hang round. I'm going abroad again."

"What—back to Italy?" cried Miss Porter in astonishment. "And what does Mr. Pallant say to that?"

"He doesn't like it much, of course," confessed Gillian, "but I wouldn't be engaged under any other condition." She set her lips.

"It seems to me from your own account, Jill, that you're giving that poor man an uncommonly thin time."

"Am I?" Her smile conveyed no hint of mirth.

"By the way," said Ammy, "did you see much more of Mr. Frazer after we left Assisi?"

"Not—not very much." Gillian felt the blood mounting to her forehead and was angry with herself for this display of emotion.

"Does he write to you?"

"I heard from him once," she admitted reluctantly. "I didn't answer the letter."

"I always thought he was in love with you," observed Miss Porter complacently.

"I am sure he was nothing of the kind! I don't believe he even liked me," said Gillian warmly.

"He was an uncommonly decent sort," said Ammy, "but I expect I should find more to say to him at North Berwick than I ever did at Assisi. Stuffy little place, wasn't it, Jill? Oh, you can call me a Philistine if you like, but I felt simply choked there. Choked by the atmosphere or whatever you call it—it seemed to catch you by the throat!"

"Oh, did you feel like that?" said Gillian interested.

But Amaryllis switched off the conversation, and resumed a more congenial topic.

"Oh, by the way, I saw Patience Ferrard the other day and heard some Roman gossip from her. That young brother-in-law of Imogen's—the Marchese della Meldola—is engaged to Grace Widness. You remember the American girl who cut Patience out?"

"Oh yes, quite well," said Gillian, flushing a little. She wondered if Patience had imparted anything further about Giacomo, but she did not dare ask. She had learned now to be heartily ashamed of the whole affair. But it had left certain impressions upon her mind that she knew could never be effaced; perhaps that was why she hated to be reminded of it.

"Mrs. Widness will be delighted," she added guardedly, "and so will the old Marchesa."

She pictured Grace, the happy and delighted little handmaid, trotting dutifully around after her mother-in-law, accompanying her in her innumerable works of charity. But the thought caused her no envy.

"Patience declares he's not the least bit in love with her. But then we all know the grapes are sour," said Amaryllis with her buoyant laugh. "They are to be married almost at once, I believe."

Presently Hengist appeared to fetch his fiancée. He accepted a cup of tea from Gillian, and then asked permission to smoke.

The two women presented a marked contrast, but he congratulated himself that Amaryllis was not delicate and fragile-looking like Mrs. Driscoll. "I should never have dared take a woman of that type to a bad climate," he thought to himself.

When he had lighted his cigarette he said quietly:

"By Jove—it really looks this evening as if there would be a scrap!"

"A *scrap*?" said Gillian bewildered.

"Between Austria and Servia," he explained.

"What tosh! Of course it will be settled all right. There won't be war!" said Amaryllis confidently.

The words awakened a very disagreeable and almost forgotten memory in Gillian's mind. She had been a little child, less than eight years old, when the South African War broke out, but she could very perfectly remember Miss Matty uttering those same four words in reply to a timid remark of Miss Letty's that "things were looking bad in the Transvaal." "*There won't be war. . . .*" She was for the moment back in the dining-room at Brock Street, a small child sitting at the breakfast-table between her two aunts, and she could hear Miss Matty saying those words in a tone almost of contempt. And her childish belief in the infallibility of her elder aunt had sustained a rude shock by the events that so swiftly followed. *There was war*—a long war, a sad war, and it was possible that many lives were still darkened by its shadow. Something of its sadness had dimmed Gillian's childhood. Her nurse had talked freely in front of her, and she, alert and intelligent, had gathered that there were black days of anxiety, of defeat, of ill-success in the winter that followed. She could remember the troops marching through the streets of Bath, stalwart men khaki-clad. She could remember going with her nurse to the station, to see them pass amid

enthusiastic crowds who had assembled to give them a send-off. And among that crowd were women and girls who wept and refused to be comforted. But on the whole it had been just at first a stirring, dramatic, hopeful time, full of an excitement that seemed a little unreal because it was so unaccustomed. Afterwards Gillian, who was always sensitive to atmosphere, caught from her elders something of the profound gloom, the depression, and discouragement that hung like a dismal pall over the black, dark winter days. She remembered a little later that a girl at her school after a few weeks' absence returned wearing a black frock trimmed heavily with crape. Her brother, a youth of eighteen fresh from Woolwich, had been killed on Spion Kop. Many, many people had worn mourning in those days. . . .

It was all still so fresh in her memory that she wondered how Amaryllis could have forgotten it so completely as to be able to say now with such confidence, "Oh, there won't be war." How could people still cherish the comfortable belief that war had become impossible? Captain Sprot's words had filled her heart with a fear that was inherited from those childish days. . . .

"Anyhow, England wouldn't have to come in," said Amaryllis.

In the silence that followed, a curious little incident occurred. Gillian observed that her friend's bright, good-natured face became suddenly grave as if a shadow had passed over it; she turned and looked at Hengist with an expression in her eyes that Mrs. Driscoll had never seen in them before. It was an expression of great tenderness mingled with a strange terror. It made Gillian think of the shadow of fear passing for the first time over the serene face of love.

Hengist Sprot kept his eyes rigorously averted, yet something in the expression of his face informed Gillian that he was intuitively aware of Ammy's scrutiny.

The pause that followed was not quite a normal one; it seemed tense and expectant.

"I'm not at all sure about that," Hengist answered at last, and speaking rather as if the words had been dragged from him.

"Oh, you've been listening to those horrible old pessimists at your club," said Amaryllis impatiently, "the ones who've always got their terrified eyes on Germany!"

"They're pretty sound men, some of them," said Hengist. His face wore an anxious expression.

A gloom had suddenly fallen upon the little party. Captain Sprot had finished his cigarette, and perceiving this Amaryllis rose to go.

She stooped and kissed Gillian. "Good-bye, my dear Jill," she said, "and don't forget Thursday fortnight. But you must come round and dine with us one night."

Gillian watched them from the window as their two tall figures moved quickly down the street. Their long steps seemed to march in unison.

He turned to her and said:

"Charming woman—your friend, Mrs. Driscoll." But Ammy only said:

"You don't really think there will be war, do you?"

And she looked at him again with that strange new expression in her face. For the first time perhaps in her life Amaryllis Porter's eyes were bright with fear. . . .

CHAPTER XXIV

THEY had not been gone more than half an hour when Gillian heard a motor stop abruptly outside. She looked out, more from curiosity than from any other motive, and saw to her surprise Paul's slight figure emerge from the car.

She had not been expecting him until Saturday, and this sudden unannounced appearance of his three days before he was due increased that vague anxiety which Captain Sprot's words had awakened within her heart.

He came into her sitting-room a few minutes later, looking preoccupied and rather perturbed as if he had just heard either bad or very important news. And he kissed her, still in that preoccupied way. He was silent, and seemed to be waiting for her to speak.

Gillian sat down and asked him if he would have some tea.

"No, thanks," said Paul, "it's too near dinner-time. You must dine with me to-night, Jill; it'll have to be early, because I must get back."

"I can come at any time," said Gillian tranquilly. "I've just had Ammy Porter and her fiancée Captain Sprot to tea." She paused a moment and then said: "He seemed to think the news was serious."

"So it is serious," said Paul abruptly; "they've stopped all leave. I came to tell you I shan't get off on Saturday. There's something queer about Germany's attitude."

Gillian drew in her breath sharply.

"Would it affect us in England?" She looked at him almost pitifully as she spoke.

"That remains to be seen. But if Germany marches through Belgium to attack France we shall have to come in."

Both were silent. The cloud was growing larger. Already it was assuming grave proportions; already could be heard as if from afar the steady marching of leviathan armies, the booming thunder of mammoth guns. . . .

"You must give up all thought of going abroad, Jill," said Paul in a tone of almost rough authority that, strangely enough, she had now not the slightest inclination to resent. "It wouldn't be safe, even if it were possible. You mightn't be able to get back when you wanted to. Perhaps I shall be the one to go, so you'll have your wish, we shall be separated all right." His tone was light, but she felt that he was acting a part.

"You mean that you—you would have to go?" she said.

It cost her an effort to steady her voice as she spoke.

"If there's war we should be among the first," he answered.

She put out her hands and touched his sleeve.

"Paul, what do you think yourself?"

"I think if it comes it'll be the most appalling war the world has ever seen. It will be . . . Armageddon. I wish we had more men."

Gillian shivered involuntarily and drew her hand away. She saw herself again, a little child clinging to her nurse's hand watching the khaki-clad troops march past on their way to the station at Bath. All along the street women stood sobbing. . . . She had cried a little herself from sheer sympathy, though she understood so little what it all meant.

"It will mean simply this—that Germany's ready, her preparations must be complete. Her only weakness is in her fleet." His face clouded. "I shan't be up next week—I have to go north on special duty. Jill, if it comes to war we shall be fighting for

our lives, don't make any mistake about that." He came near her then, and putting his arms around her drew her to him and kissed her. "I wish it were October, my dear. I don't believe that you'd say no to me now. One or two of our chaps have decided to get married at once."

The sense of unreality deepened in Gillian. She felt as if she had been called upon suddenly and without warning to contemplate an approaching catastrophe which it had been made impossible to avert. It was like watching a train making headlong speed towards the edge of a frightful precipice.

Scarcely a week ago she had spent happy, peaceful, indolent days with Paul on the Avon; it seemed then as if nothing could part them or come between them and their ultimate happiness. Now the threatened frustration came like a dark shadow between them. She clung to Paul's hand.

"It's the worst of luck for me that we can't be married now," he said quietly.

Suddenly she recognised what it might mean for her if the worst came to the worst and war should be declared. It seemed to her already as if Paul were slipping from her grasp. Already he was a little further away. She had spoken confidently of marrying him in January; it came into her mind now that the ordering of human affairs was a less easy thing to accomplish than she had supposed. One might hope and plan and prepare, but the future lay wrapped in obscurity. Perils, obstacles emerged from the obscurity to defeat those plans, destroying them as if they had been frail houses built of cards. And as her mind pursued this train of thought a sick cold feeling of actual physical fear came over her. Had she fought for her happiness and fought in vain? Was she going to lose Paul, not through his infidelity as she had lost Aylmer, nor through his

stubborn religious principles as she had lost Giacomo, but through a mightier power—the Angel of Death who reaps men as with a scythe? She turned sharply away from Paul and a sob broke from her. He took her hand in his, stroking it gently, trying to soothe and quiet her by this simple action.

"My mother's taken fright," he said presently; "I've had a wire from her—she's coming back to town. She's asked me to go there. Joan is coming too."

He had been a little surprised at receiving this invitation from his mother; since the disclosure of his engagement they had not communicated.

"Oh, shall you see her?" said Gillian.

"If I can get up again to-morrow I'm going to see her," he said; "she says she's got important news to tell me."

"Important news? I wonder what it can be?" said Gillian.

"Something to do with Alastair Grant and Joan, I expect," said Paul. "They've been staying near his people in Scotland. I shouldn't wonder if Joan had made up her mind to marry him at last."

"Ammy's going to be married on Thursday fortnight," said Gillian; "she asked me to go to the wedding."

As she spoke she recalled with a sinking of the heart the look she had intercepted that afternoon—the look that Miss Porter had bestowed upon Hengist. Love shadowed by fear . . . love shadowed by fear . . . love the conqueror trembling and afraid because for the time he sees as in some obscure vision the dark waters of Charon's dim flood, across which each lonely soul must pass. . . .

There was no long suspense. In less than a week the first blow had fallen. The first paralysis had

been succeeded by a strange energy. The world was suddenly transformed. A loyal Ireland displayed a sudden tranquillity in the face of the approaching storm. The outrages of the Suffragettes, which had for so long irritated and perplexed the nation, ceased. No one spoke of anything but war. No one read anything but the dreadful newspapers. Wild and extravagant stories of victory and defeat were circulated only to be contradicted. Troops were moved mysteriously, stealthily, across the Channel. There were no demonstrations of farewell such as Gillian remembered nearly fifteen years before, no frantic send-offs, no enthusiasm of departure. Bands and bugles were hushed. Sometimes there were not even individual farewells, there was no time. The railway service was dislocated by the movements of the troops. A profound mystery drew a thick curtain across those movements. Everything was accomplished swiftly and secretly. Gillian experienced in those first days a nerveless, helpless paralysis of mind and body which possessed many women at that time. She sat in her room nearly all day, eating mechanically a few scraps of the meals that were brought to her with such terrible regularity. She felt incapable of action and envied her more fortunate sisters who had flung themselves whole-heartedly into an orgy of work, of knitting and sewing and Red Cross classes.

One morning she received a note from Amaryllis Porter. "We have decided not to risk waiting," the letter ran; "we shall be married at nine o'clock on Saturday morning and there will be no reception. Come if you can, dear Jill."

She envied Ammy. . . .

The note was quickly followed by one from Paul, dated from his mother's house in Belgrave Square:

"Alastair and Joan have fixed it up. I'm to give her away—if I can—next Monday."

She felt bewildered. There was something tragic about these marriages, as of women marrying dying men. . . .

From time to time Paul came to see her; his visits were brief and generally unexpected. She hardly dared leave the house for fear of missing him or a message from him. The telephone bell made her start and tremble. Her nerves were jarred by the inertia, the suspense. When Paul came he seemed to her changed. He was eager and full of ardour for the coming campaign. She felt as though she no longer occupied the first place in his life, in his thoughts. When he came to say good-bye to her she could not cry; her heart seemed turned to stone. He told her that he would be leaving in two days. It was a great secret. People were forbidden to speak of the movements of the troops; it might endanger their safe transit to France. He would write to her when he got across. She was stunned and bewildered by the awful upheaval . . . she kissed Paul and received his kisses uncomprehendingly. A sudden vision of her little school-friend in Bath rose before her eyes . . . she could see the very way in which the black frock had been fashioned with a deep hem of crape that gave a curious air of mature dignity to the childish small figure. Yes—that was the kind of thing that happened in war. . . . She might never see Paul again. Why had she ever felt so sure of their happiness? It had been so close to them, theirs almost for the taking . . . surely it could not now be cruelly frustrated? . . . She put out two groping, clinging hands, as if to hold him back from all the dangers that encompassed him. . . .

"Paul—Paul—what does it mean?" she cried. Her eyes were bright with unshed tears.

He tried to calm her.

"We shall want all our courage, my darling," he said, taking her in his arms with a kind of passionless tenderness. "It isn't going to be easy for any of us—for women as well as for men. Women who lost their husbands in South Africa may have to give their sons now. Sons who were perhaps too little to remember their fathers' faces . . ."

She looked at him then as if trying to photograph his face for ever upon her mind—the smooth black hair that grew so thickly against his forehead, the striking and unusual pallor of his face with its heavy-lidded, melancholy eyes and thinly pencilled black eyebrows, his smile that was at once rare and singularly attractive. He had become in those days most passionately dear to her. It was as if a gigantic mirror had been held up before the whole nation wherein each individual beheld the secrets of his own heart in due proportion and without possibility of evasion. The false gods fell in that hour. The sifting of the wheat was accomplished as it were automatically. Each heart knew in the reflection of that gigantic mirror the thing that in all the world was most dear, most precious. . . . There was no escaping that knowledge.

And for Gillian the whole world had become suddenly empty; it held only herself and Paul. . . . She felt as if only now had she learned what love could mean. . . . She did not understand the Gillian who had once treated that love so lightly, had tried to put another in its place, had thought and spoken carelessly of repudiating it.

It was only after he had gone that evening that she was able to cry.

CHAPTER XXV

GILLIAN had never at any time a detailed remembrance of the first days of the Great War. Events followed each other too rapidly, so quickly that their outlines blended one with another. Nothing stood out sharply or distinctly; all was blurred and confused as if it had taken place in the dark. She seemed to lose all sense of the passing of time.

She was one of those people who in times of very acute anxiety require to be alone. She therefore moved into a little furnished house in Chelsea near the Embankment. It was in a very quiet road, and its shady garden made a pleasant refuge in those September days. But those first weeks were to her like an eternity of torment, formless and nebulous.

The world held its breath watching with eyes of anguish the fierce and pitiless grinding underfoot of Belgium, followed by the mad rush of the enemy Paris-wards. The people of France were on their knees; their churches were open day and night, receiving vast throngs of men, women, and little children. A hundred thousand candles were piously lit that week in the Church of Our Lady of Victories. It seemed impossible that Paris should be saved. When the German strategy failed suddenly and completely within sight of its objective it seemed as if an audible sob of relief went up from the throats of those kneeling worshippers. There was a hint, spoken of guardedly in some quarters, openly in others, of miraculous intervention at the Battle of the Marne. Paris was safe. . . .

Before he left for France, Paul and his mother were completely reconciled. It was indeed a time of general reconciliation. In the face of that one great enemy, ever nearing the gate, all lesser enmities were set aside; there was no longer any room for

them. People forgot their feuds. Hatchets of quite respectable antiquity were suddenly buried. The hardest hearts softened. The most miserly gave abundantly; there was a spontaneous emanation of love, sympathy, and altruism. Many prayed to whom the habit of prayer had long been unknown. Golden lads flocked to the recruiting stations. The very face of England was changed. . . .

Gillian spent the time for the most part alone. She shrank from her fellow-creatures, afraid to disclose her pain. She was like a stricken animal that creeps away to hide its hurt. To many proud natures there is something shameful and degrading in suffering, whether it be physical or mental; it seems to impose humiliation upon soul and body. It is a thing to be hidden at all costs. Those who pray for it and welcome it in deep submission belong already perhaps to the ranks of the Saints. . . .

Sometimes Joan came to see her—a hurried visit between two meetings. Mrs. Grant was a fully qualified Red Cross nurse, and was eagerly awaiting the hour when her qualifications should be put to a practical test. If Gillian had been capable of smiling in those days she would have smiled at the immense change that had come over Joan. There was a new assertiveness about her, a disposition to criticise others, a determination to impose her own point of view upon the world in general. She had been only too ready to accept her husband's estimate of her own absolute infallibility. From this pedestal to which he had raised her Joan had learnt in these days to look down upon Mrs. Driscoll. As a happy wife she was able to feel a little contemptuous disdain for the woman who had so conspicuously failed in her own marriage.

She found Jill one afternoon sitting out idly in the garden, with a book lying open in her lap.

"I can't think how you can be so idle, Jill, at such a time," she remarked reprovingly.

"Can't you?" said Gillian listlessly.

"Alastair likes me to be busy; he wouldn't care to think I was mooning about all day with my hands in my lap!"

"You are quite right, my dear Joan, to do what your husband wishes," said Gillian.

"You might at least—*knit*!"

Mrs. Grant's tone was becoming exasperated. Of what use to prick when your victim gives no sign of pain?

"I don't know how," confessed Gillian.

"Oh, I could soon teach you! Have you got some pins and wool?"

"Not now, thank you, my dear Joan," said Mrs. Driscoll quickly. "I'm really paying lots of people to knit, if you must know!"

"Still one wants to feel one's doing something!" said Joan.

She wondered now at her own old extravagant admiration of all that Gillian did and said. Alastair had openly confessed that he did not admire women of "that type," and thought Paul was making a very great mistake, one that he might possibly live to repent. Thus was the old idol summarily dethroned and dispossessed by the new. "And of course she is appallingly useless," Joan thought to herself. "A national crisis like this shows people up in their true colours!"

"Do you sit out here all day long?" she inquired, glancing around the garden.

"Not all day, but whenever I feel like it."

"I suppose Paul writes to you?"

"I've had one postcard with everything scratched out except that he was quite well—one of those printed things."

"Oh, yes, mother had one too. I have had two letters from Alastair," said Joan proudly.

A servant emerged from the house and approached them.

"Please, ma'am, Mrs. Sprot wants to speak to you on the telephone," she said.

Gillian got up and ran indoors without stopping to make an apology to Joan for leaving her.

She took up the receiver. It seemed to her that already she knew what Ammy had to tell her.

"Are you there? Is that Ammy?"

She waited. Then:

"Come and see me, dear Jill. You will come at once, won't you? Mother's away and I've had a telegram. Oh, you understand, don't you? It's about Hengist. Yet, yes, it's really that. Do come as soon as you can. . . ."

Gillian's face was as white as a sheet when she went back into the garden.

"I'm awfully sorry, Joan," she began, "but I'm going round to see Mrs. Sprot at once . . . she's had bad news. . . ." Her words came pitifully. Joan sprang up, and it was the old Joan, a meek, tender-hearted, tearful girl who stood before her.

"Oh, Jill dear, you don't mean that?" The tears were in her blue eyes. She put her arms round Gillian's neck and kissed her. "Oh, poor thing—she was only married two or three days before we were! Let me take you there in the motor. I'm not going anywhere this afternoon."

Gillian went upstairs and put on her hat. She and Joan started off in the motor without delay. They scarcely spoke a word on the way to Albemarle Street, where Ammy and her mother had taken rooms. Even Joan saw the necessity for silence.

There are killed and wounded by war of whom no returns reach Downing Street. . . .

When Gillian first saw Amaryllis she remembered those words from the poignant little history of Jack-anapes. She knew that she was in the presence of one of the innumerable uncounted wounded in war of whom no official record is ever kept. It was pitiable to see her. Her brave cheery manner seemed to Gillian the saddest thing of all. The telegram, a few hours old, lay in her hand.

"Dear Jill, how simply sweet of you to come. Of course I always knew it was going to happen . . . but I didn't think it would be so soon." Ammy's blue eyes were quite clear and tearless. She stood up looking very tall and erect. "These have been awful days, haven't they? You see he was almost one of the first." Her voice dropped a little.

Gillian laid her slim white hand on Mrs. Sprot's big sunburnt one.

"Dear, dear Ammy," she said, "how glad you must be now that you were his wife. . . ."

"It's just two months since we were married," said Amaryllis, twisting her wedding ring. "Yes—I'm very, very glad I was his wife. I wish I could have seen him before he died. . . . I'm sure he was splendid." She stopped, and raised the hand with the ring on it to her lips. "When we got engaged in Egypt last winter we thought we should have a long, long life together. . . . I suppose every one thinks that. . . . And we had less than a week together. . . ." She looked pitifully at Gillian. "Couldn't you stay with me? There's mother's room—she won't be back till to-morrow."

"But of course I'll stay with you, Ammy dear," said Gillian. "I'll just run home and get a few things, and leave my address in case any message comes."

"Ah, that's the dreadful part of it," said Amaryllis; "one doesn't dare to go out for a few hours

without leaving an address. And now I shall miss my rack. . . ." Her voice held for the first time a queer catch in it as if her throat were closing. "You won't be long, will you, Jill?"

"No, I won't be long," said Gillian; "have you had tea, Ammy? You ought to have some. Give me a cup before I go. . . ."

When the tea came she made Ammy rest on the sofa while she poured it out. Mrs. Sprot was soothed by the silent friendliness of Gillian, her care for her comfort. She drank the tea, for she had eaten nothing all day—not since the arrival of the fatal telegram.

As she lay there Gillian glanced from time to time at her. It seemed to her that in some obscure manner Amaryllis had found a source of consolation that was supporting her in her hour of supreme trial. She wondered what it could be, for on the face of it her friend's life was utterly shipwrecked. Through all her absence of sentimentality Gillian could perceive that she had given her whole heart to the man she had married. She had known it ever since the days they had spent at Assisi together, when Amaryllis had spoken to her so openly of her engagement. What could she see ahead of her now to give her that look of tranquil hope in the midst of this desolation?

At last Amaryllis looked up.

"I meant to make our marriage such a splendid thing, Jill. I felt I could bear anything as long as I had him with me. I meant never to complain or grouse as so many women do when things go a bit wrong, or when they have to live in places they don't like."

Gillian said softly:

"Many women will envy you very much, Ammy, because you had that week's happiness. . . ."

She knew for herself that if she had been Paul's wife her own rack would have lost something of its fierce power to wrench her heart. She could have faced her lot more bravely. Now as she sat there she could not help thinking, "If Paul were to die. . . ." Amaryllis was the first of her friends to suffer bereavement, and the event had brought the war most forcibly home to her. Although she had only seen Captain Sprot one or twice, she felt something of the sorrow of a personal loss. He had been so young and strong, so splendidly alive and eager.

"You mustn't think me a hard-hearted brute not to cry," continued Amaryllis after a pause, "but you know I've never been much of a hand at it, and I simply can't cry now, I only wish I could, I should feel better then. I think my tears have all dried up. I daren't break down, Jill, yet my heart is one big raw wound."

"I'm sure it is, Ammy dear," said Gillian softly, stroking her friend's hand.

The caressing gesture seemed to soothe Amaryllis, who lay back against the cushions, and for a few minutes closed her eyes. In repose she looked fearfully tired, with the fatigue that only a great grief can give. She had been in suspense all these last weeks, and now the sword had fallen, swiftly, without warning. . . .

Suddenly she opened her eyes and stretched out her arms, drawing Gillian's face down to hers.

"I want to tell you something, Jill darling," she said.

She whispered a few words into her ear.

When Gillian drew back her head her own face was wet with tears.

"Oh, Ammy, I am glad, I am glad!" she said tenderly.

"Yes—if God gives me Hengist's son I shall have so much, so much to be thankful for. That's why I mustn't break down or make myself ill. That's why I must go on being brave. I can't think of myself, Jill! My son must be worthy of his father."

She was already beginning to learn that the war was an easier thing to bear for those women who had children, and who possessed a stake in that future generation for whom the present was being sacrificed. It seemed to form then but a part of the maternal sacrifice which comes naturally to those who have children, a part of that immense unselfishness which is to be found throughout nature. It was the blood from the breast of the pelican. . . .

CHAPTER XXVI

ONE day to Gillian's surprise Lady Pallant came to see her. In the national crisis she had forgiven Paul, and now she was prepared, temporarily at any rate, to forgive Gillian. The spirit of reconciliation was abroad, and had claimed her. Though she had resisted it at first she found herself longing to do something to please her son. She thought it would make him happy if she wrote and told him that she had seen Gillian. His devotion to Mrs. Driscoll was unfortunate, but it was not a thing of yesterday, was no passing and fleeting passion, and he had displayed in this regard an obstinate faithfulness that was characteristic of the Pallants.

Lady Pallant was feeling lonely too. She had never spent the month of September in town before, and she found the atmosphere with its stuffy sense of used-up air very trying. Joan had slipped insensibly out of her control through the path of matrimony. She even refused to regard Belgrave Square as her home, preferring to put up at an hotel and thus savour the full joy of her newly acquired liberty. It must be said that at this stage Lady Pallant found her daughter more than a little trying. Her thoughts were so completely concentrated upon Alastair that she seemed practically to have forgotten Paul's existence; she confessed to no anxiety upon her brother's account. Joan had developed of late on quite new lines; she had become alarmingly prudent, resourceful, and independent. She was critical and contemptuous, and immersed in work of all kinds. She spoke frequently and disdainfully of Mrs. Driscoll, whom she visited occasionally out of pity, though professing impatience towards her idle uselessness. To hear her one

could only picture Gillian as surrendering to an otiose insensibility. A course of this soon drove poor Lady Pallant into the opposite camp, and thus she descended upon Gillian one wet evening early in October.

When she alighted at the green door of the little house in Chelsea and rang the bell, it was still raining heavily. The door swung back to admit her, and she walked up the little path of wet flags between the remains of what had until lately been a pretty and gay herbaceous border. Only a few Michaelmas daisies and chrysanthemums remained to display blots of soft indefinite colour. The trees in the garden showed diminishing foliage of a sad and rusty brown, and the grass was sodden. Lady Pallant shivered a little as she gazed upon the autumnal scene. "What a bore a garden must be in London," she thought; "so much effort and trouble, and so little to show for it all."

She wondered why Gillian had elected to bury herself in Chelsea, a picturesque locality no doubt with its pleasant views of the river, but a very inconvenient neighbourhood unless one possessed a motor.

She had not announced her intention of coming, for she had rather shrunk from committing her reasons to paper. And in these days the world was so changed one did not have to stop and consider whether one would be welcome or not, one took it for granted that one would be. If it were not the millennium it at least resembled it in this respect, that the lion could for the moment lie down with the lamb without unduly alarming that helpless, nervous, and innocent animal. Yet in spite of these reflections, Lady Pallant did feel a moment's acute apprehension as she followed the servant across the little hall into the drawing-room.

The day was gloomy and a small electric lamp

burnt on the table by Gillian's side. She rose quickly as her cousin came into the room and went forward to meet her, wondering a little as to her errand, but profoundly convinced that it must be of a pacific nature. Else why should she have come? But another thought—a terrible, paralysing thought—succeeded the first one. Was she the messenger of bad news? Had she come to tell her that something had happened to Paul? For a second Gillian's heart stood still with terror, but Lady Pallant's first words removed ^{his} apprehension.

"My dear Gillian, I have been wishing to pay you a visit for some time past. I hope I have not chosen an inconvenient moment!"

"Oh no, Cousin Janet—I am delighted to see you. Do sit down and have some tea. It's only just come in."

Lady Pallant loosened her coat and sat down in the chair indicated by Mrs. Driscoll. She glanced round the room.

"What a charming nest you have here, by dear," she said.

"Yes, isn't it pretty?" said Gillian. "I was in luck to get it. Of course it's tiny, but it's quite big enough for me."

She gave Lady Pallant some tea and then poured out a cup for herself.

"I suppose," said Lady Pallant without delay, "that you have had news of Paul."

"Yes, I have had several letters and some post-cards."

At the mention of Paul her face flushed a little.

"He seems well, and wonderfully cheerful," said Lady Pallant.

"Yes," said Gillian.

Her face softened and Lady Pallant observed the changed expression. It had seemed to her when

she first came into the room that Gillian, despite her studied politeness, her careful welcome, had been ever so slightly on the defensive. Perhaps it was only natural, for she must have known through Paul how very strongly his mother had objected to their engagement, even to the point of forbidding him the house should he ever marry her. But Lady Pallant had been prepared for a certain manifestation of prickliness, and she had come to smoke a pipe of peace, for the sake of her son. She stretched out her hand and touched Gillian's.

"My dear, I am sure you must be feeling very anxious. Ought you to be so much alone?"

This sudden flourishing of the flag of truce took Gillian a little by surprise. But she returned the pressure of Lady Pallant's hand and said,

"Yes, of course I am anxious, Cousin Janet. We all are, aren't we? One wakes in the morning with such a dark cloud hanging over one, and at first one can't remember what it is. I can't think why we weren't all deliriously happy before the war . . . our troubles must have been such very little ones. But I'm so used to being alone I don't find that makes much difference."

"I hope you will come and see me whenever you can," said Lady Pallant, who was determined to perform her task thoroughly.

"Thank you very much, Cousin Janet."

"I am often lonely myself. Joan comes in every day, of course, but generally for such a hurried visit! And she's so wrapped up in Alastair. Of course it is only natural, but I should like to feel that she was not entirely indifferent to her own brother. I do not," confessed Lady Pallant, "find Joan an altogether sympathetic companion just now."

Gillian could not repress a smile.

"She seems very busy," she observed.

"Busy? She's out morning, noon, and night. Red Cross, Belgian refugees, soldiers' wives, and I do not know what besides. I am sure it would be far better for her to concentrate upon one thing. But she has her finger in every pie. I can hardly believe it's the same girl who used to be so lazy and loll about half the day."

"Were you not astonished at her engagement?" inquired Mrs. Driscoll, who secretly sympathised most profoundly with Lady Pallant, for had she not also suffered from Joan's vigorous energy? She had only just been able to stop her from going to urge Amaryllis to join some committee. "Work will keep her thoughts off," Mrs. Grant had confidently affirmed. "It's the worst thing in the world for her to be moping alone." Gillian had been compelled to speak very plainly and Joan had gone away in a huff.

"Oh no, I was not at all astonished," said Lady Pallant, helping herself to some cake. "I always knew she meant to have him. Joan could never do anything simply, she always liked to appear mysterious and evasive, and she enjoyed keeping him on tenter-hooks. No doubt it is very good for a man if you are quite sure of him. But you must be very sure. . . . When she told me of her engagement she assured me that she had been in love with him all the time." Something of irritation crept into her manner. The old Joan had been tiresome enough, but she had been at least submissive, if one put one's foot down, and amenable to discipline. But the new Joan was both tiresome, wilful, and opinionated, refusing to recognise any authority but the absent Alastair's.

"Did you notice any change in Joan?" Lady Pallant inquired after a moment's pause.

"Oh, she was a little inclined to—to give me good advice," replied Gillian with a smile.

"I hope you snubbed her well," said Lady Pallant.

"Oh no, I didn't snub her. She is very pleased with herself just now. I didn't want to spoil her pleasure. I just let her go on," said Gillian. She added, "She hasn't been here very lately. I am afraid I annoyed her by not letting her go and see poor Ammy Sprot, who has just lost her husband."

"You were quite right," said Lady Pallant approvingly; "she ought never to have suggested it."

She looked at Gillian a little curiously as she spoke. It was the first time she had seen her since her engagement to Paul, and she found herself trying to look at her with her son's eyes, endeavouring to discover what there could be in this woman to inspire a devotion at once so obstinate and so passionate. The thought that Paul had been ready to submit for her sake to that harsh sentence of exile from his mother's house pierced Lady Pallant's heart as with a sword. Gillian held him with chains.

. . . Proud and cold to every one else, Paul was her slave, prepared to endure all things for her sake. He had made no advances to his mother after the rupture between them; he had never sued her forgiveness nor attempted any reconciliation. She had herself made the first advance by summoning him home; she had gratuitously granted the forgiveness he had neither asked nor sought. But for the tragic accident of the war she would still have been steeling her heart, shutting her doors, against him. These reflections held bitterness, and as she looked at Gillian, the cause of it all, that bitterness insensibly deepened. Gillian it was who had robbed her of Paul. Paul would have sacrificed the whole world for this one woman. . . . As she looked at her Lady Pallant tried to discover wherein this attraction lay. Of course she was pretty, and in an unusual way, but she was no longer in the first fresh-

ness of her youth; those past experiences of hers had made her look more than her twenty-three years, had given her a maturity of outlook, a grave assurance. Numbers of girls were far prettier. . . . But she had—something. Lady Pallant did not deny it. There was a grace about her, a charm elusive but permanent, a suggestion of suffering. Her eyes were beautiful and held a curious sadness.

Lady Pallant was so immersed in these reflections that she was quite startled when Mrs. Driscoll said suddenly:

"Did you know that Aylmer had married again?"

"Married again? How shocking! Of course I had not heard it. Whom has she married?"

"Deborah Venning," said Gillian slowly.

"*Deborah Venning?* Impossible! Your own friend?" Lady Pallant's words were jerked out in a series of staccato notes.

Gillian flushed a little; her eyes were fixed on the pattern of the carpet.

"Yes,—my own friend," she said with a bitterness she could not control.

"My dear, it is incredible! Did you know?"

"Not at first—not for a long time. I hadn't a suspicion even," Mrs. Driscoll spoke deliberately but reluctantly. She added quietly, "I hear that Aylmer has gone as a dispatch rider. You see, he was too old to enlist."

"I wonder Mr. Venning allowed his daughter to make such a marriage," said Lady Pallant severely.

Gillian said: "He thinks everything Deborah does quite perfect."

She remembered Deborah's fear of his eyes being opened. The thought brought a bitter little smile to her lips.

Lady Pallant broke in abruptly, "I wanted to

“speak to you about your own engagement, Gillian. Of course you know that I do object very strongly to it. But my objection has nothing personal in it. I disapprove on religious grounds. I hope you have always understood that?”

“Perfectly, Cousin Janet.” There was a hint of prickliness in the brief answer.

“It is very difficult to reconcile one’s religion with one’s feelings,” pursued Lady Pallant with a sigh. “Of course I forgave Paul before he went abroad. I considered it my duty.”

“I was very, very glad to hear it, Cousin Janet,” said Gillian earnestly. “I have always been sorry that I came between you.”

“You’ve no scruples yourself on the point?” asked Lady Pallant, looking at her with penetrating eyes. “You can’t see any reason why you shouldn’t marry him?”

She had no idea that her words touched a raw spot. She knew nothing of Gillian’s past struggle, of her rebellion against the Hand that would have moulded her anew, of her shrinking from the pain that that new shaping must have inflicted upon her . . . when she first felt the touch of that Hand which Ian Frazer had warned her would hurt. . . .

The little face hardened. Gillian said evasively:

“I know that many people have scruples. But I cannot see that they concern Paul and myself,” she added in a curiously controlled voice.

“When do you think of getting married?” asked Lady Pallant.

“We spoke of January. I wished to wait until a year had passed. Paul always had a misgiving—a kind of presentiment against waiting, even before there was any thought of war. I am free now, and if he wished to have it in October. . . .” She

paused. Her eyes met Lady Pallant's. She wondered how she would receive this information.

"He is sure to want it to take place the first moment he can get leave," said Lady Pallant. "I feel positive he will not wait until January." She knew her son's disposition; it was the kind that wears away a stone. "I wonder if you will be able to hold out." She looked at Gillian as if trying to measure her capacity for resistance.

"Of course it's more difficult now. The war has altered things—one wants to do everything one can for them."

"I quite understand. You mustn't think me hard-hearted and unfeeling. I have been simply torn in two, between my love for Paul and my principles. If everything had been smooth and *en règle* I should have been the first to welcome you, to urge you not to delay. I want Paul to be happy. It hurt me to see his face at Joan's wedding—I knew so well what was passing in his mind."

When she rose to go she kissed Gillian on both cheeks.

"Good-bye, my dear—take care of yourself. You are looking very pale, and thinner than I like." She paused and then said: "Once I wanted to come and see you and entreat you to give Paul up for my sake as well as for your own. But I can't ask you to do that now, for I know it would break his heart. Don't delay your marriage, Gillian, for anything that I may have said or done in the past. I see that I must give way to Paul in this. And if you make him happy, I shall forgive you everything!" She kissed her again.

"Thank you, Cousin Janet," said Gillian simply.

But there were tears in her eyes. She guessed dimly at the great fear which had dominated Lady Pallant to such a point that it had made her haul

down her flag and capitulate. The fear seemed to communicate itself to her own heart. She thought of Amaryllis and trembled.

"And if he does get leave next month?" said Lady Pallant.

She looked wistfully at Gillian. She seemed to be waiting for her to speak.

"I can't say anything definite now, Cousin Janet," said Mrs. Driscoll.

"But you will remember that I have completely and utterly withdrawn my opposition?" said Lady Pallant.

"Yes, thank you, Cousin Janet."

It was a relief when Lady Pallant had gone. Her presence disturbed Gillian, though at first she had felt flattered by the unexpected visit, the waving of the flag of truce. Gillian had ever feared those future snubs, and their effect upon Paul. No man likes to see his wife slighted. . . . She was glad to think that at least his mother's house would not be closed to them. But Lady Pallant's words had revived and re-awakened other thoughts in Gillian's mind. That point-blank question as to whether she possessed no scruples on the point herself had been a chance but well-directed arrow, piercing her to the heart. A whole flood of memories engulfed her. She could see Ian Frazer's face, she could hear his words. She remembered, too, the impassioned speeches of the Marchesa della Meldola. The impression made upon her by these events was a permanent one. They seemed to touch hands with things that were not temporal but divine. That was why they were so strong, so fierce and merciless in their strength. Once they had flung her in the dust. She had lain there for a moment of incredible humiliation, feeling as if she could never again arise and look the world in the face. And she had

found salve for her wounds in Paul's love. Paul's love had healed her with a beautiful tenderness, evoking her passionate gratitude. She could never be grateful enough to Paul.

But if the national crisis, the presence of a hitherto unimagined peril had served to slacken Lady Pallant's scruples, it had only intensified Gillian's. She fought against them, believing that as she had conquered them before so she would conquer them now. Paul was hers—hers to love and marry. Every day of tragic anxiety made him seem more passionately hers. It was not the moment to think of offering sacrifice before that altar which once had seemed to claim its human victim. . . .

Gillian sat down and wrote a long letter to Paul to tell him of his mother's visit. He would, she knew, be delighted to hear of it. Although he had been doggedly determined to oppose her in this matter of his marriage he had been deeply wounded by her hostile attitude. But there was one thing she did not mention—that final appeal of Lady Pallant's that when he did return home he should not be denied. About their future marriage Gillian said nothing. She seemed to be groping in darkness, trying with helpless hands to push apart the dark clouds that enveloped her. For once she had looked upon the light that lay beyond, and it had threatened to dazzle and blind her eyes with its fierce and cruel brilliancy. . . . She craved only for a dim twilight safe and secure, where she might go hand in hand with Paul. . . .

CHAPTER XXVII

IT was a wet warm evening in October. Road and pavement were shining black with rain. Overhead the clouds travelled swiftly, pushed on their way by a westerly wind that threatened to become a gale as night advanced.

The tense sense of expectancy still reigned in a London that strained its ears only to hear the booming of the guns in Flanders and in France. In the last few weeks it had seemed as if all the horrible prophecies of past years, proclaimed in book, pamphlet, and novel, had materialised, become incarnate, with grim and deadly fulfilment.

Gillian had not been out all day. It was one of those days when she preferred to remain restlessly indoors. Throughout the day a succession of newspapers was brought to her; she read each one superficially, glanced at the telegrams, at the awful lists, and then flung them aside. Life was horrible. She envied Joan her capacity for work; she envied even Amaryllis for all that the future held for her. . . .

After tea when it was growing dusk and the lamps were already lit she put on a coat and hat and went down the garden path to the gate. She could see the lights gleaming on the Embankment with a subdued and altered brilliancy; there was something furtive about London now, she thought, as of a city trying to hide its own immensity. The wind blew in her face as she stood there irresolutely; then she closed the gate behind her and walked quickly westward.

Once in her walks she had passed a little Catholic church hidden away down a small street; it occurred to her now that she would like to go there and pray. Lately she had been afraid to pray. She felt as if

that fierce, hidden, interior rebellion of hers must militate against the efficacy of those prayers.

It was a poor little church; the pictures were modern; the statues tawdry and ill-coloured. The building was almost in darkness, except for the red lamp burning before the Tabernacle and some candles that were fixed on to a triangular stand before a statue of Our Lady. There was little here to appeal to the senses, to the eye. Yet, as Gillian entered, a sense of oppression, of suffocation that was not altogether physical, came over her. She crept into one of the back benches and kneeling down hid her face in her hands.

No service was in progress, but quite a number of people were kneeling there in prayer. There were men as well as women, young as well as old. Sometimes could be heard across the deep and reverent silence a half-suppressed sob. The candles burning before Our Lady's altar made a little patch of light in the twilight gloom; the effect was almost abrupt.

. . . As Gillian knelt there she deliberately yielded herself to those influences which she had once known in the Lower Church at Assisi. She saw again the immense cool grey spaces of the Basilica with its glimpses of delicate and subdued gold showing themselves from the haloes of frescoed Madonnas and saints and angels in a jewel-like beauty. She could hear the monotonous burring of the friars as they chanted their office—a sound like the humming of innumerable bees. Here there was nothing of beauty to make its appeal to the eye. The bare walls of the little church seemed to reveal a humble but proud poverty. The flowers on the altar were of a cheap and common kind, and they were even supplemented by artificial ones of rather a dreadful appearance. Gillian scarcely noticed these details in that moment when she lifted her head and made

a brief survey of her surroundings. But she looked more attentively and with a little wonder at those other worshippers. Probably the majority of them were Catholics, and if so it was possible that across their passionate prayers could be heard that most poignant and necessary one of all: *Fiat voluntas tua*. But her attention was not long diverted from the urgent business she had in hand. She knew that she had come here to-night for a definite purpose, and it must be accomplished. Every soul has its Hour in the Garden, when only submission and renunciation can avail. . . .

There was no long space of time between her and that evening at Assisi. The past stretched out hands and touched the present, as if it were clasping it. Gillian was merged once more in that hour of surrender and submission, complete, unquestioning as a child's. And to her heart, strangely stirred within her and alert to receive impressions, there came a thought, a conviction of more than vital significance. She felt that she was not only the suppliant but the one to whom a mystic supplication was being made. She felt as if a Voice from the tabernacle were calling to her audibly, actually; pleading with her for that surrender which she had for so long consciously and defiantly withheld and withdrawn. . . .

All capacity for vocal prayer seemed to leave her then. She was immersed once more in those waves, but they were not, as they had once been at Assisi, wild, stormy, and overwhelming ones. They were suave and gentle and welcoming, and lifted her above the fret of earthly happenings. She saw as it were in that hour her own soul and Paul's—things of flame, white, ardent, eternal. And there was born within her a new and deep sense of responsibility towards Paul. He was hers, to raise up. . . . to drag down. . . . She loved him, but she had

come in contact with a Power greater than human love, a Supreme Power, jealous, imperious, that demanded the surrender of her whole self in one single act of sacrifice and renouncement. It was claiming possession of her, but not fiercely and violently, only as it were with a persistent and irresistible appeal . . . as of one who should call a reluctant child gently and persuasively, but leaving it quite free to follow or not if it chose. Must it be always that those with great possessions should ever be the most reluctant to lay them down—the most sorrowful in yielding to the Voice of the Beloved? Oh, how much better to lay them willingly at the Wounded Feet, and follow, free and detached and unburdened! . . .

As this knowledge filled Gillian's thoughts she found that earthly claims were growing sensibly weakened. The act of unquestioning surrender to the Divine Will, which she had made almost unconsciously, had brought the immediate and direct grace of an increased strength. She felt no longer isolated and broken-hearted but supported and infinitely consoled. She had flung down her nets, and had risen to follow. . . . She had willingly placed herself in those Hands which desired to shape and fashion her anew. And instead of the torment and suffering she had experienced at Assisi she was sensible of that healing touch which soothes even while it exquisitely wounds. . . . Gillian was beyond all resistance. It seemed to her then that her whole life had been tending towards the immense act of voluntary resignation that was now so inevitable, so essential, so inescapable. Everything had crystallised towards this central point. The way thither had been paved with sharp swords that had cruelly hurt her feet. But each sword had possessed an immense significance and meaning; not one had been unnecessary or

superfluous. In this hour of renewed and intensified illumination she saw that she had been guided step by step, personally, individually. Her first rough awakening had been when Giacomo had pitilessly broken off their engagement. It had been cruelly done, but she had not been able to blind herself to the urgency of his motives. Then had come Assisi and the chance stranger, Ian Frazer, who had supplemented so much of her little knowledge, had flung the searchlight of truth upon dark places. Yes, that had been one of the swords that had hurt her most, with its strong effort to deprive the future of human happiness. . . .

For the rest there had been no human agency at work to persuade, to compel. She had seemed in these last weeks quite alone, almost bitterly alone. Tormented with anxiety and suspense, the unrest of her own heart had been perhaps the most unbearable thing of all. That spiritual unrest gave her little peace; it left her always with the sense as of a task unaccomplished. Even now the utter dying down of rebellion, the complete unquestioning surrender, had not destroyed her terror of the step involved and of the pain it could inflict. For it was on the face of it an irrevocable one. There could be no going back, no recrudescence of defiance. And with her fear there was paradoxically a fury to accomplish this thing which she still dreaded although she passionately desired it. Definite and certain beyond all the confused issues that spun webs in her mind there stood out the fact that she must become a Catholic. She must openly profess the faith she had received. She must herself raise the barrier, obdurate, impassable, permanent, that was to divide herself from Paul. Paul was her "great possession," more dear, more precious, than any temporal possession of wealth could ever be. He was

to her all that made life worth the living. This love stood out as true in the midst of the false gods of the past. It was a possession whose worth she dared not measure, and once the thought of it had caused her to turn sorrowfully away in the face of the divine appeal. She must herself take the sword and pierce her own heart as well as Paul's.

When Gillian rose and left the church she genuflected as she had seen other people do, she even dipped her hand into the stoup of holy water and crossed herself. These little actions seemed to set a kind of seal upon her resolve, linking her with those other worshippers, making her prayers one with theirs. As she walked westward towards her home she could feel the rain and wind beating softly in her face. The night promised to be wild as well as wet, but the air was warm and reviving. Just at the end of the street a tall figure emerged suddenly from the gloom. Gillian looked up and was scarcely surprised to find herself face to face with Ian Frazer.

"Why, Mrs. Driscoll? What luck!" he said eagerly. "I've been wondering how I could get news of you. You went away giving me no address, and I've often wondered how you were faring in these ill days."

"I've been faring—like every one else," said Gillian, with a wan smile.

"You're very thin," he said abruptly, looking down at the slight black figure.

"Am I? But the kind of thing we've been living through lately isn't very fattening."

"You're not married?" he hazarded, wondering a little that despite her thinness, her look almost of illness, Gillian's face should be so full of a subdued and triumphant happiness.

"No, I'm not married." She paused. "I am en-

gaged to my cousin Paul Pallant. He is in France now."

He made no comment on the information thus vouchsafed except to say,

"Where I shall be myself soon, I hope."

"You?" She looked at him in some surprise.

"Yes, I came back as soon as I could—and it wasn't an easy job, I can tell you—and I've been putting my house in order. To-morrow I shall enlist, unless they think me too much of a crock, which isn't likely!"

"Ah, it's all so easy and simple for a man," said Gillian almost enviously.

"Well, I think myself it's easier."

"Won't you come back with me now?" said Gillian. "I live not far from here. Perhaps you will stay to dinner with me? There isn't much to eat, but it's war-time, so you mustn't mind."

"I'll come with pleasure," he answered.

"Because there is something I want very particularly to say to you," she said.

"Is there?" he said, wondering what it could be and whether it would satisfactorily explain that extraordinary, illuminative radiance which had seemed to him to inform her face just now.

"I think of almost all the people in the world you were the one I most wanted to see just now——"

"Oh, but that's awfully flattering to me, you know," he said, smiling. "I'm quite keen to know what it's about."

They walked on in silence till they reached Gillian's green gate. She stopped, took out a key and unlocked it, disclosing the little white house that stood at the other end of the flagged path.

"Looks like a little Italian villino," he said.

"Yes, doesn't it? And there are vines too, but

they don't ripen. I think unripe grapes look so melancholy." She led the way into the house.

She left Ian Frazer in the drawing room while she went upstairs and slipped on a black tea-gown very simply made. He was sitting over the fire idly glancing at the newspapers when she rejoined him. He looked up as she entered the room.

"How are your friends, the Porters?" he asked.

"Oh, hadn't you heard? Ammy is Mrs. Sprot now, they were married just a few days before the war, and he was killed last month. Isn't it cruel?"

"Very cruel. How is she bearing it? She was made of good stuff—she had any amount of pluck."

"Oh, she's bearing it simply beautifully," said Gillian with tears in her eyes. "She was devoted to him, you know. And she's had letters—such letters—telling her how splendid he was. I suppose the same thing could be said of them all out there. Such courage, such forgetfulness of self, such indifference to personal danger."

"How changed everything is from a year ago," he said thoughtfully. "I've only been back a week, and it takes a little time to get accustomed. France is even more changed—you feel there that you're up against the real thing. I've been working for the Red Cross in Paris, but lately I didn't feel I was doing enough. When I go back to France it'll be to the trenches."

She waited until the dinner was over before she attempted to tell Ian Frazer why she had wished to see him so particularly this evening that his coming had seemed almost providential. It was a little difficult to approach the subject and he did not try to give her a lead. After what she had just told him of her engagement she could have no news to give him that would tell him his prayers for her had been answered. Indeed he had felt a little shocked and

bewildered at her simple announcement of her engagement to one who she knew held very decided views on the subject of her re-marriage.

She took up some sewing after dinner while he lit a cigarette and began to smoke. Presently she looked up and said:

"You have never congratulated me."

"No," he said roughly, "you could hardly expect that, could you? You can't have forgotten what I said to you on the subject at Assisi."

"No, I haven't forgotten," said Gillian, very tranquilly.

She looked at him. His fine fair face was singularly immovable; it had grown in the interim a little harder and more relentless.

"I wonder you even troubled to tell me about it," he said.

"I told you," said Gillian, "because when I met you to-night I had just come to a decision—a very difficult decision. I wanted your help."

"My help?" he echoed astonished.

"When I was at Assisi," she pursued, still in that calm voice. "I saw quite clearly that I oughtn't to marry again. I had learnt several hard lessons while I was in Italy. But I rebelled against that one. I made up my mind that if Paul again asked me to be his wife I would marry him at all costs. I felt that I had been cheated of so much that I had a right to that happiness. Almost directly after I came home I saw Paul and he asked me to marry him. He had loved me, he said, since I was a girl. I told him about my engagement in Rome and why it was broken off. Even when he found that his mother refused to receive me it made no difference to him. I knew I could always count on his love for me—on his fidelity. Paul is just like a rock—nothing can change him. I knew I should feel secure and safe as

his wife." She paused and her dark eyes regarded him steadfastly. "But I have never felt at peace in my soul," she continued presently. "I knew ever since I first became engaged to him that I ought to be a Catholic and that in resisting this duty I was wilfully and deliberately fighting against God. I couldn't plead ignorance any more, but I was determined to marry him. I felt an almost fierce and violent determination, because I felt that I had been cheated in the past!"

Ian Frazer listened in silence. He shrank a little before this relentless confession, feeling perhaps that he had little right to listen. Only—had she not said that he could help her?

"I wanted to pray for Paul," she went on, still in those quiet, level, emotionless tones, "but I could not pray for him. I felt that I had no right to pray, that my prayers did not deserve to be heard. Sometimes I remembered what you told me once—that the Catholic does not know any happiness apart from conformity to the Divine Will. That to separate oneself from God by wilful and premeditated sin is the one unhappiness. To-night I have learned that I cannot so separate myself. When you met me I was coming away from a Catholic church. I had been there to pray. And when I was there I felt that not only was I asking something from God but that He was asking something from me."

Now he knew why her face had seemed to him almost as if it were transfigured, illuminated.

"And you," he said slowly, searching her face with eyes that held the sharp glint of a sword, "you have given what was asked of you?"

"Yes," she said, "I have given it. I want you to help me to give it more completely. I am not bound yet." She looked at him with unflinching eyes. "Help me to bind myself."

"Do you know what it means—what it involves?" he said to her sternly. "Have you counted the cost?"

"I have counted the cost."

"And this man—this man who you say loves you?"

"I am responsible for his soul as well as for my own. Do not make any mistake, Mr. Frazer. I love him—it was my love for him that made me rebel. But this is something stronger than even my love——"

"What do you want me to do?" he said at last.

"I thought you could tell me of a priest who could help me. Isn't the first thing for me to learn to be a Catholic? I don't want to delay."

She seemed to him as one who goes forward willingly, even gladly, to martyrdom. But the evidence of past suffering was in her eyes. She had never seemed noble to him before; now he could have knelt at her feet. Once he had prayed for this soul so bent on elusion and evasion, now he could scarcely bear to look upon the hurt heart of her. And she was not a child who renounces without knowledge; she knew well the measure and worth and meaning of the things she was giving up.

"I will speak to a priest—a friend of mine," he said. "I think perhaps he would help you better than any one. Be as frank with him as you have been with me." He stood up. He felt that he must go away; that he must leave her. "Good-night, Mrs. Driscoll. I will write to-morrow——"

He put out his hand. Gillian took it in hers.

"Thank you very much," she said. "I knew you would help me. You seemed to me very cruel at Assisi—you hurt me very much. But now I am grateful for that hard saying." Her eyes met his frankly. "Pray for me."

"Always—always," said Ian Frazer earnestly.

"The hardest part still lies in front of me," she said.

He knew she was thinking of Paul.

"Strength will be given to you," he said quietly.

He raised her hand to his lips.

CHAPTER XXVIII

DURING the next few weeks Gillian spent the greater part of each afternoon with Amaryllis. Every morning she went to a convent not far from her own house where she had placed herself under instruction at the hands of a nun who had been recommended to her by the priest to whom Ian Frazer had introduced her. Gillian followed this course of instruction very devoutly and submissively; she was indeed like a child in the hands of her new director, and she liked the nun to whom the task of teaching her had been entrusted. There had been a certain precocity about her spiritual growth, the result of the rather unusual circumstances which had promoted it, but so far she had very little real and solid knowledge of the faith. It had been a disappointment to her to find that she could not be received into the Church immediately and without delay. Gillian was always rather precipitate in her actions; she liked to move forward on the wings of the first buoyant impulse. But she was no longer her own master. She was obliged to obey, and she surrendered herself to the task of learning with a curious and submissive eagerness. Her intention was a profound secret, known only to herself, her instructors, and Ian Frazer.

That trustiest of trusty friends had enlisted, and was doing his training in the Artists' Rifles as a simple private. Before leaving town he had paid a farewell visit to Gillian.

"Well, how are you getting on?" he asked her.

"It isn't easy," she confessed, "and there's a lot to learn. And when I think about the future . . . it hurts."

His face was grim as he answered her.

"Of course it hurts to be beaten into a new shape."

"I wish the awful part were over . . . and that Paul knew."

"Don't be too much afraid. You don't realise yet what help you will have. This time of probation is awfully trying for you."

"Supposing I find that I can't persevere?"

"You must believe me when I tell you that you've put your hand to the plough and you wouldn't go back now if you could!"

His hard bright eyes softened a little.

But in spite of his hopeful words there were hours in those solitary evenings spent alone when she did deliberately envisage what the future held for her, when she did shrink a little from the prospect offered. She counted the cost, and knew that she was called upon to make no small payment. She was sorrowful as she thought of her great possessions. Paul's letters, beautiful tender letters, made her tremble for her own perseverance.

There was, however, no real hesitation on her part after the momentous night when her final decision had been made. That vision she had had of Paul's soul—hers to make or mar—had left a permanent impression as of a printed picture upon her mind. She saw it in reference to the Eternity to which it belonged. It was precious because of its very immortality, because of its immortal rights. . . . And she felt in a certain sense responsible for it.

She and Amaryllis were close friends, but Gillian had never mentioned her resolve to her. She guessed that Amaryllis with her calm commonplace outlook would have but little sympathy with violent and complicated spiritual questions. The crisis through which she had passed was not a thing which could be very well understood by Amaryllis. Gillian

hardly knew if she perfectly understood it herself when she reviewed it in the cold light of reason. Although she had submitted generously to that new shaping she felt the sharp pain and hurt of it in every nerve. She had hoped that sense of spiritual exaltation would have deprived her of the suffering engendered. But she was learning that she was to be spared nothing of pain. . . .

It cheered her in a sense to be with Amaryllis. It was Mrs. Sprot's brave endurance, her refusal to give way, that appealed to her with its frank courage. A day seldom passed but the two women met. By a kind of tacit consent Paul's name was never mentioned. Gillian had never been over-anxious to discuss her engagement, and now she displayed even less desire to speak of him. She had told Amaryllis of her meeting with Ian Frazer, and when she informed her that he had enlisted, Mrs. Sprot made a characteristic comment: "He isn't one who'd be likely to suffer from cold feet!"

Amaryllis in spite of her resolves had fallen into a weak ailing condition of health. The tree that refuses to bend before the storm too often snaps in two. Amaryllis, brave, enduring, unbending, showing always a brave face to the world, became so ill physically that she was compelled to remain in bed. Lying there very white with great blue eyes that had somehow become too large for her face, she looked a shadow of her former buoyant self. Gillian was really anxious about her. She spent a great deal of her time in Albemarle Street, and kept her friend's room cheerful and bright with fresh flowers. Amaryllis seldom now mentioned her young dead husband; it was of the coming child that she spoke continually.

"Gillian, you're late this evening. I expected you

to tea," was Amaryllis' greeting one evening in November. "And I can't ask you to dine up here with me in my bedroom."

"Oh, I couldn't have stayed, thank you, Ammy." Gillian came across the room and kissed Mrs. Sprout as she lay there. "I'm sorry I'm so late, but I've had a very long day."

Amaryllis stretched out a brown hand that had become woefully thin and looked incapable of wielding a golf-club, and switched on the electric light that was by her bedside. "There—that's better," she remarked, "I can see you now, Jill. Why—what's happened? Have you had good news? Is—is Captain Pallant coming back?"

"I—I haven't had any news at all," said Gillian slowly, looking at her. "But, Ammy—I have got something to tell you. It's a very great secret and just at present no one must know it. I've taken a very important step to-day—one that is going to change my whole life."

"Has Captain Pallant come back? Have you married him?" cried Amaryllis breathlessly.

Was it only her fancy or did a shadow pass swiftly across Gillian's face at the mention of Paul? Why was she always so curiously silent and reserved upon the subject of Paul Pallant?

Amaryllis was sitting up in bed, her cheeks flushed, her eyes shining like flames.

"Dear, dear Jill—do tell me!" she cried.

"It is nothing half so thrilling as that," said Gillian thoughtfully. "I'm afraid you will be disappointed when you hear it, Ammy. I can never marry Paul now. What I have done to-day has made it quite impossible. I have known for some time past that I couldn't marry him—that is why I haven't talked about him. . . ."

"Do you mean you've married some one else?"

cried Amaryllis in a tone of incredulous amazement. Somehow it had never entered her head to question Gillian's feeling for Paul. "Or—has he?"

Gillian shook her head. "Oh no—it isn't that."

"Have you broken off your engagement?" demanded Amaryllis.

"I haven't done so yet," answered Gillian; "that'll be the hard part."

"Oh Jill—how changeable you are! Why, I thought you adored him!"

"It has nothing to do with my love for him," said Gillian, almost as if she were speaking to herself, "except that I think I love him more than I did—if that were possible."

She saw again the silver reaches of the river with its groups of willow trees, its blossoming banks; she saw herself again in those twilight shadows listening to Paul's voice, feeling the touch of his hands, of his kiss. . . . Had she not told him then that nothing could ever come between them and their love for each other? And he had been the one to doubt—to be afraid. . . .

"Then what on earth do you mean, Jill?" cried Amaryllis, "or have you gone stark, staring mad?"

"I have become a Catholic, Ammy," said Gillian quietly. "I was received into the Church this morning. As a Catholic I cannot marry again as long as Aylmer is alive. It's my own doing that I've separated myself from Paul."

Ammy's excited, brilliant eyes searched Gillian's face with a look of almost fierce anger.

"Oh, how could you be so wicked—so cruel—so selfish *now*?"

Gillian winced and turned pale. She had not expected this immediate and furious condemnation.

"If you had cared for him at all you would have put him first,—before everything!" pursued Amaryllis remorselessly.

"And if I tell you that I *have* put him first?"

"What—by chucking him now?"

Gillian was silent. Would all the world blame her? Would all the world, including Paul, understand her as little as did Amaryllis? . . .

Mrs. Sprot continued to speak excitedly:

"I wasn't sure when we were at Assisi that you weren't beginning to get these notions into your head. Only I thought you were too hard-headed not to be quite safe! You used to spend such an unconscionable time in the Lower Church, or out with Mr. Frazer, who is of course a fanatic and wants to convert every one! Is it Mr. Frazer's doing, Jill?"

"No—it isn't any one's doing but my own. I had begun to think about it before I went to Assisi—before I left Rome. It was brought almost violently to my notice while I was there. Mr. Frazer did try and teach me when I was at Assisi, and I began to learn . . . and then I rebelled and made up my mind to come home and marry Paul. Oh, I had resolved to defy that other teaching. Don't blame me, Ammy. It hasn't been easy. I didn't tell you till after I had taken the step because I knew all the arguments you would use. I haven't told any one yet, and I don't want any one else to know until I have told Paul."

"I don't envy you the job of telling Captain Palant," said Ammy with a touch of her old boyish brusquerie. "How shall you do it? You won't write, of course—it wouldn't be a very encouraging kind of letter to receive in the trenches. It might make him think there were worse places than the firing line!"

"Oh, don't, Ammy," said Gillian pitifully. "Of course I can't write it. But there's a chance of his coming home on leave."

"When he will probably be counting upon having

the wedding at once," said Amaryllis mercilessly. "Jill, I simply can't understand you. You look 'so soft and in reality you are hard as nails! But perhaps you never cared for him, and you've taken this short cut out of a difficult situation. I dare say that explanation will occur to him too." Mrs. Sprot's words were harsh, condemning. "You never could have loved him, Jill—it's quite out of the question."

Gillian left Amaryllis that evening feeling utterly miserable; she was indeed thankful when she could escape from Albemarle Street and return to the solitude of her own home. She wished she had not spoilt the day, which had been for her such a thrilling and beautiful one, by going to see her friend and confiding the secret to her. Now she felt that Paul as little as Ammy would be able to understand her motive. He also would imagine that she had never cared, and that repenting of her promise to marry him she had taken the path that promised a permanent escape. She had never felt any heroism or exaltation or spiritual pride in her act of renunciation; she had simply succumbed to forces that were stronger than herself; she had scarcely even stopped to ask herself whether she had emerged from that tremendous conflict the victor or the vanquished. The struggle had left its exhausting physical effects upon her, just as if she had been beaten to her knees. And now Ammy had relentlessly shown her exactly what the world would think of her action. Ammy represented the sane, normal, worldly point of view which takes little cognisance of complicated spiritual questions. And it was thus perhaps she would be judged by Paul.

He would think her capricious and vacillating, and fickle. He would remember her extreme reluctance to bind herself to any engagement; he had always been aware of her hesitation, and she had given him

no clue as to the reason of it. Now he would only suppose, as Ammy did, that her love had failed. She despaired of making him understand.

But solitude was to be denied to her this evening. As she opened the garden gate and walked quickly up the little flagged pathway she noticed that there was a light in the drawing-room; she could see it shining through the blinds that were drawn across the window. At the door she paused for a moment, wondering who could have come to see her at this hour. She had so few friends who intruded upon her at unconventional hours. Unnerved, she could almost have persuaded herself that Paul had returned and was waiting for her there; the thought made her tremble a little. Overhead the leafless trees lifted boughs that seemed like waving arms against the uniform and starless gloom of the night sky. Although it was so quiet in the little Chelsea garden she seemed to sense the throbbing pulse of the great city that lay at her doors. She could hear as it were the beating of that great heart, that seemed to-night to hold a sound as of tears . . . as of many tears . . . as of Rachel weeping anew for her children. . . .

Gillian turned the key in the door and quietly entered the hall. Beside the fire in the drawing-room she beheld Lady Pallant reading the evening papers, and evidently awaiting her return.

Lady Pallant rose and approached Gillian eagerly, almost effusively.

"My dear—such a joyful surprise! I've had a telegram from Paul saying he will be home early in the week. I see there is one for you, too—perhaps that is from Paul."

Gillian then noticed for the first time the buff-colored envelope lying on the table. She took it up and opened it with fingers that shook and trembled. A mist swam before her eyes and she could not at

first read the words. When at last she was able to make them out she felt as if they conveyed no signification at all to her brain. "Returning Monday, week's leave. Please make arrangements for our immediate marriage."

The pinkish slip of paper fell to the ground, and Gillian did not attempt to pick it up. She stood there facing Lady Pallant, trying to smile and aware that it was an impossible feat to accomplish.

Struck by her white and frightened look Lady Pallant exclaimed:

"My dearest Gillian—I am sorry I told you so abruptly . . . it has been too much for you. Do sit down here and I will ring for some water for you."

She thought to herself: "Gillian never used to be so nervous. The war is destroying all our nerves. . . . Still, she ought to be careful not to give way."

Gillian sat down on the sofa and obediently drank some water from the glass Lady Pallant held to her lips.

When at last she was able to speak the words came wildly:

"Oh, you must stop him! Don't let him come. . . . I can't marry him!"

Lady Pallant was for a moment speechless with a very natural amazement. What in the world did Gillian mean? Why did she receive news that was so joyful in this fashion? Her astonishment over, she felt more than a little annoyed.

"Dear Gillian—I know you are feeling unstrung. We have all been going through a time of terrible anxiety. One is really quite afraid of any happiness. But in this matter may I say that I hope you will do whatever Paul wishes? If he wants to have the wedding at once I hope with all my heart you will not refuse. I take back all my opposition, my objections. I only ask you to make my son happy——"

Her words, which sounded even to herself a little magnanimous, fell meaninglessly on Mrs. Driscoll's ears. She said only: "It is too late . . . it is too late . . . I can't marry him." Her voice trailed weakly over these broken sentences.

Lady Pallant began to fear a little for Gillian's sanity. A dreadful misgiving seemed to take possession of her heart. What did Mrs. Driscoll mean by saying it was too late? Why did she reiterate the assertion that she could not marry Paul? She had hoped at first that the words were only the outcome of a little hysterical nervousness, very naturally produced by the sudden unexpected news of Paul's return. But Gillian had uttered them as if they were informed with some definite and sinister truth. Yet if she had not intended to marry Paul, why had she waited to say so until the question of their marriage had become a matter for immediate decision?

Gillian pointed with her finger to the fallen telegram, as if indicating by this gesture her desire that Lady Pallant should also become acquainted with its contents. That lady, nothing loth, stooped and picked it up. She glanced at it hastily. Then she said in a very firm tone as if she were speaking to a recalcitrant child:

"I am sure when you have recovered from the shock you will see how more than unkind it would be to Paul to make him the victim of any capricious feeling just now. Our men require all the help we can give them. You must remember that you are his promised wife, and I hope you will yield to his wishes. He is not a man that will stand being played fast and loose with!"

The words were intended doubtless to have a bracing effect, to bring Gillian to her senses, and for the moment the rather authoritative little speech did help her to control her shattered nerves. That feel-

ing of sudden faintness, so terrifying to one unused to it, had passed away. Gillian was able to raise her eyes that were still unnaturally bright and answer almost calmly:

"I am sorry, Cousin Janet . . . to have been so foolish. Please forgive me. The sudden news upset me. As you say—the war—one's nerves——" She broke off, for the lump in her throat threatened to choke her.

"That's right, my dear," said Lady Pallant encouragingly. "I knew you would agree with me that this isn't the moment to think of one's own feelings. It is a time when we have need of all our unselfishness. Paul has been through a very arduous time and he has a right to be considered. If I can be of any assistance——"

But Gillian only shrank a little away and answered:

"Oh no, thank you, Cousin Janet. I can't really decide anything at all until I've seen Paul again."

Lady Pallant went away feeling a little worried about Gillian, and acknowledging to herself that she was utterly in the dark. She had expected her to maintain her usual calmness; she had awaited no extravagant manifestation of joy or emotion—that was not Mrs. Driscoll's way. She was much too sophisticated to betray her feelings even to the mother of the man she was engaged to marry. Still Lady Pallant had expected her to receive the news with some sign of pleasure and perhaps relief. But Gillian had shown no such sign. She had been overcome, overwhelmed, almost to the point of fainting, but through her broken utterances there seemed to run a thread of live fear. And though she had at last pulled herself together, not without a very obvious effort, it had been only to control most assiduously any further display of feeling. She had

attempted no explanation of her first attitude, nor had she proclaimed any intention of marrying Paul upon his return. It was not to be wondered at that Lady Pallant should feel dissatisfied and a little anxious and irritable. She wished she had not invited Joan to dinner. It had been her intention to invite Gillian also, to have a cosy little family party to celebrate the joyful news of Paul's forthcoming return. . . . Now she felt that she did not at all wish to expose herself to the cross-examination to which Joan would inevitably subject her.

"Why, I thought you meant to bring Jill back with you," was Joan's greeting as her mother entered the drawing-room unaccompanied. "Why couldn't she come?"

"I . . . I forgot to ask her," replied Lady Pallant, sinking into a chair in an attitude suggesting exhaustion. During that hectic interview with Gillian she had utterly forgotten her intention of inviting her to dinner.

Joan looked frankly puzzled.

"But you saw her? You found her in?" she questioned. "She never goes anywhere nowadays except to see her dear Mrs. Sprot!"

"Yes, I saw her," said Lady Pallant almost reluctantly. What account could she give Joan of the interview?

"Had she heard?"

"She found the telegram when she came in. She wasn't at home when I first got there—I suppose she had gone to see Mrs. Sprot. I was waiting for her. I told her the news first—before she opened her own telegram. . . ."

Joan looked at her mother curiously.

"You didn't renew your old objections, did you, mother?" she inquired. "Paul wouldn't thank you if you put a spoke in his wheel at the eleventh hour!"

Joan's manner was disagreeably assertive and disdainful.

"On the contrary I told her quite plainly that I withdrew all my old objections and opposition," she answered.

"Then what's the matter?" said Joan.

Lady Pallant had risen wearily and was moving towards the door as if to escape from her daughter's censorious examination. But she stopped half way and the two women stood and faced each other. Under the sharp glare of the electric light Lady Pallant's face looked a little aged and agitated.

"It's Gillian," she said, "I don't understand what's come to Gillian. She seemed so dreadfully upset when she heard the news. She never used to be at all hysterical, but I assure you she spoke very wildly indeed. It is Gillian I'm not sure of——" She finished the sentence abruptly.

The mother and daughter stared helplessly at each other in silence. . . .

CHAPTER XXIX

GILLIAN lay awake that night unable to sleep. She pictured Paul's return until it assumed the proportions of a nightmare. If only his telegram had not come just that day—the very day of her reception into the Church. She had wished to set it apart, to consecrate it, to her new and high resolve, to gain from it all the strength and courage she could wherewith to face the future. Instead of which after a few short hours of rest and peace she had been roughly compelled to envisage close at hand and with no merciful perspective of distance the consequences that must inevitably ensue. Ammy's words had caused the first shadow, so much so that she had quickly repented of her impulse to confide in her. Hard upon the consciousness that she had accomplished the difficult task that had been so clearly indicated to her by such a multiplicity of signs, had come the necessity of adjusting her future life in accordance with its harsh demands. She had herself raised the barrier between herself and Paul, but his presence was the one thing she feared. She knew of old its power to weaken her resolve.

It seemed to her as if her courage must give way; she longed to escape to some place where she might never see him again. She told herself she could not face so soon a meeting with him. She wondered why she had so little strength to endure the first sharp plunge of the knife into her heart. She had counted upon some miraculous supernatural strength, and instead of this there had come upon her a new and increased desolation. She felt horribly alone. And what seemed to her the worst thing of all was her utter inability to pray, to derive any consolation or comfort from that spiritual gain of hers. All sen-

sible supernatural comfort had been so completely withdrawn that she could almost have believed she had never known it at all. She had been warned of that almost inevitable "dryness" which comes to even the most devout souls, and of the fiery trial which it offers. But she had not thought to find herself so suddenly aghast at her own action. She felt cold, trembling, and frightened. She seemed to have gone forward quite heedlessly all these past weeks, temporarily indifferent and even blind to the consequences which must wait upon her action. Now she had the feeling of being flung back roughly and violently to earth, to shift for herself in a position of unprecedented difficulty, with an increased power of suffering and a diminished physical strength. . . .

Paul was coming back and there was only one thing she could tell him.

In the days that followed Gillian closed her doors upon the Pallant family. She was always out when they called. She would not risk the possibility of another breakdown before Lady Pallant; she wanted to keep her in the dark as to the real state of affairs until she had herself told Paul the truth. No idle rumor must reach his ears beforehand. She reserved to herself the right of telling him. It would have been the action of a coward to try and escape that task. From Joan's callous criticisms and questioning she shrank even more. She refused to see either mother or daughter, leaving them to draw what conclusions they might.

She sent a little note to Belgrave Square so that Paul might receive it immediately upon his return. It was quite ordinary and non-committal, asking him to come and see her as soon as he could. She made no reference to their marriage, hoping this omission might strike him as curious and perhaps prepare him a little.

She had declined Lady Pallant's invitation to luncheon, and to accompany them to the station afterwards to meet Paul. She preferred, she wrote, that he should come and see her, adding that she disliked intensely waiting about in cold stations for trains that were always late. Lady Pallant considered that this excuse betrayed more common sense than ardour. Joan made an adverse comment: "I don't believe she cares a straw about him. She's only marrying him to rehabilitate herself. Of course it is an awful position for a young woman like Jill. But she's too nervy ever to make a good wife."

Joan's novel characteristics included a robust reasonableness. She was extremely impatient with any display of nerves or temperament. Lady Pallant thought she was growing more like Alastair every day. It was wonderful how rapidly she had assimilated his points of view.

Lady Pallant and Joan were standing on the platform when Paul's train came in. In the crowd of khaki-clad men that emerged from the quickly opened doors it was at first a little difficult to discover him. Little was said until they found themselves in the motor on their way back to Belgrave Square. They had only just time to exchange embraces and words of greeting. But both his mother and sister had noticed that he had turned his head quickly as if to see if Gillian were with them, and though his face expressed no disappointment he became suddenly silent.

In the motor Lady Pallant put Gillian's note into his hand. She watched him as he tore it open and glanced at its contents. He thrust it into his pocket without further comment. But it seemed to his mother that having read it his expression became slightly more gloomy. She glanced at him furtively every now and then. Evidently he was pre-occupied, and

she guessed that all his thoughts were rigidly concentrated upon Gillian. It re-assured her to see that he looked in excellent health, in spite of the countless privations through which he must have passed. He had been gone rather more than three months, and he was now so sunburnt from exposure that he had utterly lost that characteristically black and white effect; his pallor was concealed beneath this new dark tint, and he looked consequently less delicate. But his eyes with their heavy lids and dark rings were slightly more hollow, and held a new restless expression.

"Paul is more than ever packed up," was Joan's inward comment on the chill coldness of his reserve and manner.

"I was with Gillian when she received your telegram," said Lady Pallant, anxious to show him indirectly that she was on terms of friendship once more with Mrs. Driscoll.

He frowned a little, too proud to question.

"Oh, were you?" he said carelessly.

"She said it was impossible to make any arrangements until she'd seen you."

His face lightened a little.

"I suppose you will go there at once?"

"As soon as I've had a clean-up."

He felt ill, choked with suspense. That note had said so little—so little.

"I am afraid you'll find Gillian nervous," pursued Lady Pallant—"nervous and unstrung."

She wanted to prepare him for a mood of perhaps unconscionable caprice.

"No wonder!" thrust in Joan, "she does nothing—absolutely nothing from morning till night! I couldn't get her to join a single one of my committees. As far as I can see she isn't interested in any of the war charities."

He remarked quietly, "I've never regarded Jill as an example of boisterous activity. She's not that type." A gleam of the old sarcasm flashed in his eyes. Yet even he, unacquainted with the march of events, felt a slight astonishment at his sister's frank criticism of her ancient idol.

"There is a medium between boisterous activity and absolute indolence," said Joan tartly. "Alastair says——"

But Paul was looking out of the window and by the absent look in his face she perceived with some mortification that he was not paying the slightest attention to her. The *ipse dixit* of Alastair left him obviously quite cold. She said, nose in air:

"Of course if you can get her out of that apathetic state you'll be doing her an immense service!"

Nervous, apathetic, unstrung, indolent. . . . In turn they had applied these adjectives to Gillian Driscoll as if to try and prepare him for some perceptible and untoward change in her. He pondered over them in silence. For Joan's criticisms and opinions he had nothing but contempt, and yet these epithets served to deepen the fears that lay around his heart like a wall of ice—fears that had been engendered by every letter he had received of late from Gillian Driscoll. Had the pendulum swung back again—this time not in his favour? If so there would be little time in one week's leave to woo and win her over again. So far he had always been ultimately successful in imposing his will upon hers, but invariably there had been some initial difficulty, some hesitancy of hers to be broken down, some unexpressed objection to be conquered. He had hoped and hoped that this time she would yield to his entreaties, his prayers, and marry him before he returned to France. He wanted to feel that she was indeed his, his own wife bearing his name, before

he went back to those scenes across the Channel—scenes of which he was resolved never to speak to her.

Instinctively he dreaded that first sight of her. . . . There had been nothing in the speeches of Lady Pallant and Joan to reassure him.

It was dark when he drove up to the green gate that soon swung back to admit him when he had rung the bell. He stumbled up the flagged pathway and saw that a light was shining in the hall and that a maid was waiting on the threshold to admit him. He was evidently expected, and was shown into the drawing-room without delay.

There was no one there, and in spite of the warmth of the room he felt a sudden chill sense of disappointment. He had hoped to find Gillian waiting for him. It seemed that he had waited so long he could not endure these few unnecessary last moments of suspense; they were intolerable. Then he glanced round the room. A bright fire blazed on the hearth. On a little table were books and newspapers, slightly disordered as if they had only recently been abandoned. He saw and recognised lying there Gillian's little blue silk work-bag. This intimate possession of hers spoke to him eloquently of her; he took it up and kissed it. Oh, why was she not there? Why did she not come down? His heart was crying out for her. . . .

Ten minutes passed. Gillian upstairs was on her knees praying; she felt incapable of rising and going down now that she knew Paul had indeed arrived. Paul wandered restlessly around the little room, examining the pictures quite mechanically, looking at the photographs, the titles of the books. Not one of them made the slightest impression on his mind and memory. Under pain of death he could never

afterwards have given any account of them. Why did she not come?

The door opened at last to admit her. Paul had been prepared for a change—all women were changed, it seemed to him, though perhaps not to the point of such a complete metamorphosis as Joan! Even his mother had acquired new and less arbitrary standpoints in the great upheaval. But this change was physical. Gillian was very pale; her thinness bordered on emaciation, she looked ill, and as if she had not slept. He had often assured himself that she could never be as beautiful in reality as in those visualised presentments of her when she had seemed to haunt his trench and make it the loveliest place in the world. Now he told himself that she was infinitely more beautiful than any of those exquisite and imagined visions had ever been. . . . He went up to her with eyes shining and arms held out. And across his joy it seemed to him that she stood there like a cold and unresponsive statue, neither encouraging nor repulsing that embrace. His lips touched hers—there was again that simple acquiescence and submission to the caress proffered. She did not speak nor smile, and if any one had told him that this was not Gillian but some pale *revenant* masquerading in her guise he would have had little difficulty in believing them.

"Jill . . . Jill . . . my dear . . . my darling," he said.

There was no use in delay; he must know the best or the worst at once. His days in England were numbered.

"Jill," he whispered, "will you marry me this week?"

His voice was stern now and not tender; it was controlled and steady and authoritative. There was much more demand than entreaty in his tone. But

it awoke Gillian from her lifelessness. She freed herself from his clasp and moved a little away from him.

"I shall never marry you, Paul," she said.

There was a tense pause. Under the tan of the sunburn Paul's face was livid.

"You don't mean it—you can't mean it, Jill, my darling! You can't break my heart now."

He came over and knelt at her feet, kissing them. . . .

"Paul—don't kneel. I have something to say to you. Oh, try and listen and bear it . . . and don't reproach me!"

His words, his touch had diminished her vitality; she felt almost faint as she had done when she had first heard the news of his approaching return. Her very life seemed to be ebbing from her. Can a heart bleed to death inwardly she wondered? For that was the impression she had now of her own heart in its fierce pain. . . .

"You don't love me then?" he said. His eyes were sunken, lustreless. "You've never loved me? Is that what you're trying to tell me?"

She shook her head.

"I love you, Paul," she said quietly. "I love you more than anything in the world. But it is impossible for me to marry you now—for a reason I am going to tell you." She looked at him with eyes that held a sadness beyond all words. "I have no right to take what you offer me—I have never had the right. I have been fighting against God." She put out both hands and held his as if she were clinging to him for that human support needed on account of her curiously diminishing physical energy. Yet even in that moment of weakness the strength of her new purpose seemed to have increased immeasurably. "I have become a Catholic, Paul. I have been fight-

ing against it all these weeks and months. I could not believe that God really required all the sacrifice of my happiness—I could not believe that with my own hands I was called upon to build this barrier between us. Then one night suddenly—I was praying, and I knew that these things were required of me, and for your sake as well as my own.”

But Paul stood there looking at her silent and speechless. He told himself that this thing had always been between them ever since her return from Italy in the summer, and that even in the early days of their engagement it had divided them. He had been sensible always of some withdrawal in Gillian, of some place in her heart which he in spite of all his great love had failed to occupy; of some influence which from the first had been sharply militating against that love. . . .

“Does that mean,” he said at last, “that you can never marry me?”

“While Aylmer is alive—never.”

He had the sense of a loss so great that it utterly shattered and destroyed all other issues. He had lost Gillian, and he felt that it had happened in the moment when he was least able to bear it, when such a calamity could produce within his heart the maximum of pain. He had lost her. . . . Yet in strange contradiction he had never before felt so completely convinced of her love, as in this moment when she definitely set aside its claims. She was suffering too. He felt the presence within her of something spiritually triumphant and magnificent.

“Did you do this,” he said at last in a strange hoarse tone, “because you were afraid of the risk for me?”

“For you—for me—for us both,” she answered tranquilly.

He felt her tears dropping on his hands; they were, he thought, as warm drops of blood.

She added quietly, "If you knew all that I know you would understand that I am offering you a final proof of my love."

She was grateful to him that he made no violent outcry against the fate she had imposed upon him—that he made in fine no attempt at argument, recrimination, reproach. Deeply rooted in his nature there was an unselfishness that triumphed now. He could not war against that delicate conscience of hers. If this thing gave her happiness, let her have it at whatever cost. But he knew that it was not a question of mere happiness. It lay quite beyond and outside of human issues. Even if they had married it would certainly have arisen to divide them. Had she not said that she had fought against it? Paul was not a man to think lightly of spiritual issues. In the life and death conflict in which he had been engaged of late, his reverence for them had been immensely strengthened.

He put out his arms and drew Gillian to him; his lips touched hers. "Dear Jill," he said brokenly—"dear Jill, I know you haven't done this hastily or unadvisedly. I have felt there was something between us all the time. It is a rival a man mustn't be too jealous of." His eyes were very bright now; they had a look in them as of unshed tears. "I know I have no other rival in your heart."

"You may be sure of that—always—always, Paul."

When he left he turned back for a second at the door, pausing to look at her as if to register that last impression the more perfectly upon his mind and heart. She looked beautiful—more beautiful than he had ever seen her, he thought; the saints of old must surely have worn that mien as they went

to their martyrdom. He felt more strongly and deeply than ever before that that outward beauty of hers was but the reflection of a spiritual loveliness that had augmented and increased within her all these months as she went step by step towards the consummation of her sacrifice. How could he ever have hoped to make her his—to imprison that soul of hers in the fastnesses of an earthly love- . . .

CHAPTER XXX

PAUL went straight up to his room on his return. He felt so stunned and bewildered that he had some difficulty in believing in the reality of the scene through which he had just passed. Gillian's letters as well as his own formless fears and presentiments had, it is true, prepared him for a change in her, but nothing had ever suggested that it would be an irremediable one. Always before his presence had been quick to re-awaken within her the love she undoubtedly had for him; thus when they were apart he had been able to reassure himself with the conviction of his own power over her. Only once or twice had it occurred to him that her elusiveness had been founded upon something more solid than mere caprice. Now she had torn all the veils away. She had shown him the truth with a splendid courage. For the moment it had blinded him. Now with her presence withdrawn the magnitude of his so sudden loss was overwhelming.

He had accepted it all very simply. He had been determined not to add to the sum of her suffering by exposing the measure of his own. His consideration for her, always meticulously delicate, had spared her as far as possible all additional pain. Looking back on their interview Paul was able to assure himself of this with a heart-broken pride. Gillian belonged to him in a manner and sense that no human tie could have deepened. And in this case the human tie, at war with her conscience in a dreadful interior conflict, must certainly in the end have thrust them utterly apart.

The hurt to his pride was slighter than he could have imagined possible, for had he not every possible assurance of Gillian's abiding love? He had

not been dispossessed by any human rival. She had succumbed to forces against which she had for a long time and most passionately rebelled. He began to wonder now why he had felt so little curiosity as to the details of the matter; he still had no idea where or when she had been received into the Church, or by whom. He had accepted her simple statement and had not paused to make any inquiries. There was a latent envy within him now of those unknown ones who had supported her, befriended her, in the hour of final sacrificial surrender.

Paul set his teeth grimly as he went down to dinner that evening. He shrank from meeting his mother and sister, aware that the moment of their enlightenment could not be delayed. They must be prevented from discussing his approaching marriage with their friends, so the sooner they knew the truth the better. The few days' leave that lay in front of him, which had once seemed too short, too inadequate to hold the cup of so much joy, now stretched out like some grey vision of an unhappy eternity. He was practically bound to spend the time at home in London almost within sound and sight of Gillian. There was torture in the thought. . . . He longed to be back in the thick of the conflict, working as he had never worked before. Nothing seemed so difficult as this intimate evening that lay immediately before him.

Dinner had been fixed for half-past eight, and it was understood that he should be alone with his mother and sister. Gillian had refused Lady Pallant's invitation to be present. His mother and Joan were already in the drawing-room when he appeared punctually at the half-hour.

Joan, attired in a straight and simple black dress of very severe cut—the erstwhile loose and flowing

draperies *à la* Gillian having been disdainfully discarded—looked up and smiled at him as he came in. Lady Pallant, who was writing, laid down her pen and said, "Well, Paul?"

He stooped and kissed her, then smiled at Joan. His face was like an iron mask, so rigid was its control. He had himself well in hand. But he was disagreeably conscious of his sister's attitude—of her sharp unsympathetic curiosity. Perhaps neither she nor his mother would be extremely sorry to hear that his engagement had been broken off at the eleventh hour.

They went down to dinner. At any other time Joan's chatter would have got on his nerves, now he felt almost grateful to her for dissipating the silence that must otherwise have ensued. He began to realise that Miss Pallant and Mrs. Grant were two very different people, and he detected in Joan's assertive conversation that she desired to acquaint him with the change. She wished him to recognise the fact that she had become a very important person, and could no longer be snubbed and made to appear ridiculous.

It was only when dessert was on the table and the servants had left the room that he looked up and said:

"Gillian has definitely broken off our engagement. We shall not be married——" He spoke mechanically, emotionlessly, like one who repeats a sentence he has learnt by heart.

But even to his own ears his voice sounded rough and unnaturally loud.

Joan dropped a pear she was in the act of peeling; Lady Pallant put down the glass of port wine she was just raising to her lips.

"I always felt certain she would!" said Joan vindictively.

She wondered if there would be time to-night to write and tell Alastair this important news.

"Broken off her engagement?" cried Lady Pallant. "Why—what reason can she have, after all these months, for treating you so—so infamously?"

She remembered those sobbing broken utterances: "Don't let him come. I can't marry him. . . ." What had happened? What did it mean?

"She hasn't married any one else, has she?" cried Lady Pallant, struck by a sudden thought. "Not that Italian she got so talked about with when she was in Rome last spring?"

Paul's eyes flashed with indignation.

"That affair lasted only a very short time. The man has since married an American heiress." His tone suddenly became more cold and temperate. "Gillian's reasons for refusing to marry me are such that I have been obliged to accept them without remonstrance." He glanced from one to the other, wondering a little at his mother's indignant astonishment. She seemed to have quite forgotten her own early opposition to the proposed marriage, and to blame Gillian as deeply for breaking off the engagement as she had originally blamed her for entering upon it.

"I don't see what reason she can possibly have unless she has married some one else," said Joan.

"She has become a Catholic," said Paul gravely; "and as long as Aylmer Driscoll is alive the laws of her Church forbid her to marry."

This second piece of information startled them even more than the first. Joan was the first to break the little pause that followed.

"I should have thought she might have found a way of escape that wouldn't have entailed burning *all* her boats!" she said, with a dry little laugh.

The taunt in her words made Paul flush under-

neath the dark tan of his face, but he did not reply. This aspect of the situation had never occurred to him, nevertheless he now felt that it was an interpretation many people might reasonably place upon Gillian's action.

"Gillian—a Roman Catholic!" said Lady Pallant in a shocked and pained voice. "I can hardly imagine such a thing to be possible. I had no idea that she had any religious sense at all. She never seemed to care about going to church. I wonder what put it into her head. Perhaps—some one in Italy. . . . I always disapproved of such a young woman going off like that, quite alone, to foreign countries."

"Oh, she'll never stick to it," said Joan, "Jill hates any kind of discipline. She doesn't know what she's in for, I am quite sure. It is all part of that very excitable, emotional, nervous condition of hers. It is only a new pose."

"She had everything to lose by taking such a step from a human point of view," said Paul, "you must at least give her that credit. And if you see Gillian I beg that you will not reproach her. She has suffered very much."

"Paul, how extraordinary you are! You actually seem to approve," said Joan irritably; "you take everything Jill sees fit to give you absolutely lying down!" Her voice held scorn. Why did he permit himself to be treated thus, without remonstrance, with no display of proper pride? It was inconceivable that he should endure with meekness the immense caprice of Gillian!

"I do approve," he said with perfect calmness, "as far as I can approve of her taking any step that has such far-reaching consequences upon her future as well as upon my own. But I could never ask of her that she should go against her own conscience

in such an important matter, even if it were not too late for such a demand to be futile."

What a fool he was about this woman, thought Joan with increased irritation. How blinded he was by his love for her! She had played with him as a cat plays with a mouse. And at the last she had thrown him over, and in such a fashion that he bore her no ill-will but even defended her action, regarding it as one imposed by her conscience.

"I can't imagine why under the circumstances she ever promised to marry you at all," said Lady Palant severely; "she had no scruples in the beginning, I am quite sure. There must be another motive behind it all, Paul—one that you have never penetrated," Her words conveyed the belief that a worse and more violent awakening lay in front of him. She could not yet assimilate his view as to the delicate conscience of Mrs. Driscoll. Gillian had caught him originally with a wholly unscrupulous dexterity, well aware how she his mother would utterly disapprove of such a marriage for her only son. She began to regret most bitterly those advances she had made to recover Gillian's friendship; she felt as if she had humbled herself for nothing.

But her words had hurt Paul deeply. For the first time his cast-iron pride seemed to melt in the face of the attack. He looked at Joan.

"Jo, can't you say something in defence of your old friend?" he pleaded pitifully.

Mrs. Grant answered coldly:

"My friendship with Jill is a thing of the past. I can't understand now how I could ever have put up with her whims and caprices, I have so little patience with them now. There's nothing stable or solid about Gillian. You can never be sure of her from day to day." She uttered the little condemning phrases without remorse. "Everything with her is a

pose. And now that she has treated you so very badly I shall never bother my head about her again. Alastair always said it was a thousand pities you should ever have got engaged to her!"

Joan knew she had gone too far, but she had practically lost control of her tongue. It was immensely agreeable to have this opportunity of enunciating her own opinion of Gillian to Paul. She revelled in her little triumph.

Paul did not reply. He rose and without another word went out of the room.

"My dear—you shouldn't," said Lady Pallant reprovingly, "and his first night at home too."

"But he asked for it, didn't he?" said Joan. "I can't understand this new move of Gillian's, can you? It's so very unlike anything she's ever done before. Some one has been influencing her—some one we have never heard of. She's done this on purpose to put a barrier between herself and Paul in such a way that people can't blame her."

"Still, you should have been more careful what you said to Paul about her. You know what his temper is. I'm dreadfully sorry there should have been this unpleasantness so soon after his return. He will begin to regret that he came home at all."

"You had better blame Gillian then, not me," said Joan sharply, "it is her doing. Why on earth couldn't she write and tell him instead of letting him come back so full of hope? She is a very designing, artful, intriguing woman."

It was not sufficient for Joan to have discovered the clay feet of her idol; the whole world must share in the discovery.

"Alastair always disliked her," she added, as if this put the final seal upon the downfall and condemnation of Gillian Driscoll.

CHAPTER XXXI

BEFORE Ian Frazer left for France he paid a visit to an old and dear friend of his, a Mrs. Carrington, who lived in a dark brown house in Curzon Street. He wished to enlist her sympathy in this new convert, and he was by no means deterred by the knowledge that Mrs. Carrington was in deep mourning as she had just lost her only son, who was also her only child, in France. He had fallen while gallantly leading his company. . . .

Mrs. Carrington was an elderly woman, but she was still extremely beautiful with dark iron-grey hair that grew thickly against her forehead in soft waves, and dark eyes that were neither brown nor grey. She was in her way quite a personality, and had one of those houses where people delight to go, not only certain of their welcome but assured too that they will meet there other charming and agreeable persons, in a pleasant and sympathetic atmosphere.

Just now the house was closed against all but her most intimate friends. Mrs. Carrington's suffering had been very intense, for as far as a very devout woman could do so, she had idolised her boy. But Ian was among her most intimate friends. She had helped him in all kinds of ways during the critical time of his own conversion, and the bonds thus forged between them had never been relaxed. He was about the same age as her own son, and the two men had also been friends.

Judging Gillian's present position to be extremely desolate and surrounded by no common danger, he had resolved to beg Mrs. Carrington to come to the rescue and befriend her.

It was a wet windy evening in November when he found himself ushered into the large rather old-

fashioned drawing-room which ran from front to back of the house in the usual London fashion. Mrs. Carrington was sitting wrapped in a shawl by the fireplace. She looked up as he came in.

"How nice you look in khaki, Ian," she said, holding out her hand to him without rising.

"I don't feel like myself in it," said Ian smiling. "I got very slack about dress at Assisi."

He sat down and looked at her with his bright steel-like eyes.

"I've got a good work for you to do, my dear Madrina," he said. She was not really his god-mother, but she had helped him so much when he had been received that he had bestowed this name upon her out of gratitude and affection.

"I cannot undertake any good works just now," said Mrs. Carrington, "it's really quite impossible. I'm going over to Les Sables on Wednesday week to start my hospital."

"So you have just ten days by your own showing in which to do what I want," replied Ian calmly.

"My time between this and then is fully occupied. It's no small matter starting even a little hospital in France."

"I only want you to come with me one day and see a friend of mine, Mrs. Driscoll. She is a very recent convert—in fact, she was only received last week."

"Who is Mrs. Driscoll? I never heard you speak of her."

"I first met her in Assisi last summer. She is quite young and very pretty——"

"And living apart from her husband of course," she observed sapiently.

"How cynical you are," said Ian, "but it is even worse than that. She has divorced him, and was about to make a second marriage when," he paused,

"when—it just happened. She struggled for a while, of course, and very nearly gave in. But thanks be to God——" He bowed his head reverently.

Mrs. Carrington was interested in spite of herself.

"Did anybody use their influence with her?" she asked.

"At the time of her decision she was quite alone. I had a shot at it last summer when she told me something of her history. And some woman in Rome had told her what the Catholic Church teaches about the re-marriage of divorced persons."

"And this man she thought of marrying?"

"He's at the front now," said Ian. "He seems to have taken it most awfully well. He has been devoted to her for years, and is very unselfish about her. But she's awfully alone, *Madrina mia*. She doesn't know any Catholics at all except a priest and a few nuns and myself. Do come and see her with me."

"I don't see what good I can do. And I'm much too busy to attend to my old work of looking after converts."

"But—just this one," he pleaded. "She is really very charming. I'm sure you'll like her."

"It seems to me that you are very deeply interested in this woman, Ian," said Mrs. Carrington in a tone that was almost severe.

"Oh, but I am," said Ian frankly, and meeting her look without the slightest embarrassment. "I don't know when I've been so interested in any one. It's been such a wonderful thing, you see, to watch a soul—a little weak, helpless, insignificant soul—being pursued and hunted and captured. Even the best of us seem such worthless quarry," he added. "I want you to be kind to her because she has been through a good deal. By the way, she is quite well off—she might help you with your hospital."

"I don't want pecuniary help," said Mrs. Carrington, "and I am not going to have any untrained women working there. The wounded have quite enough to endure without that."

"Well, do just come and see her. I'm sure you'll take an immense fancy to her," said Ian confidently.

Mrs. Carrington allowed herself to be persuaded, principally because she seldom refused Ian Frazer anything, and secondly because the little account he had given her of Mrs. Driscoll had aroused her sympathetic interest. On the following afternoon she drove to Chelsea with him. Gillian had already been informed of their intended visit and she felt a little curious to see this woman of whom Ian thought so much.

He was nervously anxious about the success of his little plan; for while he felt quite certain that Mrs. Carrington would like Gillian he felt much less certain about Gillian herself.

But Gillian received them both in such a simple and friendly fashion that after a very short time Ian was able to go away and leave them together, feeling thoroughly assured of the success of the experiment.

Mrs. Carrington, already disposed to like Gillian, took an immense fancy to the pretty, delicate-looking woman who had been through such strange and stormy experiences. Her heart went out to her.

"My dear," she said very kindly, after Ian Frazer had departed, "Ian has told me so much about you that I feel as if we were quite old friends. It is quite lately, he tells me, that your miracle took place."

Miracle? Gillian both looked and felt puzzled.

"To me every conversion is such a wonderful miracle," said Mrs. Carrington.

"My conversion was forced upon me," said Gil-

lian. "Nothing was further from my mind when I went abroad last spring than the thought of religion. It was forced upon me," she repeated.

Encouraged by the kindly interest Mrs. Carrington was displaying she related some of her experiences, as far as she was able to express these in words, especially those that had come to her in the Church of San Francesco at Assisi, and afterwards in the little church at Chelsea. Mrs. Carrington listened with deep attention. Nothing perhaps interested her so profoundly as the history of a conversion. For no two are alike; to every soul there is something exceptional and individual in the path that leads to the goal. The sum of sacrifice demanded differs in every case. Sometimes it is so little; sometimes the hard commandment of "Sell whatsoever thou hast and come, follow Me," is given,—a sacrifice that is almost too great to be made. Gillian had paid the full price, conscious that it was inevitable.

It was very pleasant to her to find herself in an atmosphere of sympathy and approval. Lately she had had much to bear of condemnation, disdain, and disapproval from her friends and acquaintances. Only Paul, who had suffered most, had never reproached her. It was the power of understanding her that he had evinced which had been of such immense consolation to her.

"I do not know if Mr. Frazer has told you that I am just starting a little hospital at Les Sables," said Mrs. Carrington presently; "I am going there next week with four trained nurses. But if you liked to come with me I am sure that you would find plenty to do. You could help me with the housekeeping and in looking after the linen—things that most women who have had a house of their own understand. I wanted some one, but I didn't want to take a girl. I think you would be the very person——"

"Oh, I should like it so much," said Gillian quite eagerly. "I have been very idle all this time and have done nothing to help."

"My dear, you have been busy about other things," said Mrs. Carrington gently; "sometimes God requires all our time for Himself. Do you think you can be ready as soon as next week?"

"I feel as if I could be ready now," said Gillian.

"I hope to start on Wednesday week and get things in thorough order by the end of the month. We might travel together. But I shall see you again before then. I am not receiving at all just now, but I should be very glad if you would come and have luncheon with me on Sunday."

She rose to take her departure, and moved by a sudden impulse she kissed Gillian on both cheeks. "Good-bye, my dear. I cannot tell you how happy it has made me to make your acquaintance. I shall not let you overwork yourself at Les Sables. You don't look at all strong."

As she went away she thought to herself:

"What a child she looks to have gone through so much! And such a fragile child too. I must write and tell Ian what we have arranged."

The letter was written that same evening. "I've quite fallen in love with your little friend. She is coming to Les Sables with me. Of course I know this is what you always intended, you intriguing person."

Ian Frazer chuckled over the letter. This project had certainly been in his mind from the very beginning, but he had not imagined that it would materialise so rapidly. Now he felt that he could go away knowing that Gillian was in safe hands.

Amaryllis was dreadfully aggrieved at the prospect of Gillian's departure. She was not at all well;

the weather was bad, and she could not even go for drives; she depended very greatly upon Mrs. Driscoll's daily visits.

She had recovered almost immediately from her momentary anger at hearing Gillian had become a Catholic; had even written a humble little note of apology, full of promise of amendment, the same evening. "We mustn't quarrel, Jill dear," she wrote, "and of course I know you think you are doing your duty. I simply can't do without you now."

But when Gillian came and disclosed her new plan of going to Les Sables poor Amaryllis was so aghast at the thought of losing her that she began to cry weakly.

"Oh, Jill, how unkind of you! I do want you so much. Mother fusses so—and I simply hate other people about. You've been with me all the time, you see."

Gillian tried to comfort her. "But I've been horribly idle, and now this work's been offered to me I don't like to refuse, Ammy. And Mrs. Carrington——"

At the sound of this unknown name Amaryllis lifted her head and regarded Gillian resentfully.

"Who in the world is Mrs. Carrington? I never heard you speak of her before."

"She is a friend of Ian Frazer's. He introduced us to each other because he thought I ought to have a Catholic friend."

"Very kind and thoughtful of him," said Mrs. Sprot in a tone of disdain. "Jill, why do you let people interfere with you so? You let yourself be chivied about from pillar to post," she added with what was to Gillian a welcome touch of her old *argot*. "Why should you allow this woman to drag you off abroad just because she's a Holy Roman?"

"Oh, she's not dragging me. I was quite delighted

at the prospect of going to Les Sables. And she has lost her only son in Flanders—she looks very sad,” said Gillian gently.

“I didn’t think you’d desert me now, Jill, for any new friend. I thought I could count upon you,” said Amaryllis. “It will be hateful when you have gone.”

“Dear Ammy, I do want to help. And perhaps I shan’t be gone many weeks.” She bent down and kissed her friend. “I hope you won’t miss me so much, Ammy, directly you are feeling a little better and can go out for drives again.”

Even Mrs. Sprot could not keep her in London. She was eagerly looking forward to the day when she should start for France with Mrs. Carrington. She felt almost excited at the prospect. Only the thought of Amaryllis made her feel a little guilty as if she were acting selfishly. Was Ammy right in saying she allowed herself to be too readily influenced by other people? Perhaps that always happened to a woman alone, without ties, without any one to restrict her. Ever since her divorce she had been inundated from all quarters with advice good and bad. It was difficult to know what to do for the best, but she had consulted her confessor and he had approved of the plan of her accompanying Mrs. Carrington abroad.

She wished Amaryllis had not needed her so much. And one evening she encountered Mrs. Porter just as she was leaving, and took fresh alarm at the sight of that lady’s anxious and worried face.

“I am so very sorry you are going abroad, Gillian. Poor Ammy’s dreadfully upset about it.”

She spoke so reproachfully that Gillian flushed.

“I am very sorry to leave Ammy, too, Mrs. Porter. I had no idea when I promised to go that she needed me so much.”

"I am anxious," said Mrs. Porter in a sepulchral voice, "about Ammy."

"Anxious?" echoed Gillian.

Considering the painful circumstances she had not thought there was anything abnormal about Mrs. Sprot's state of health.

"You must see for yourself how terribly changed she is," continued Mrs. Porter. "Oh, I know she has been very brave and all that, but I sometimes think she was too self-controlled, too determined not to give way at the beginning. She's a mere skeleton, and I know she's just fretting to death."

Gillian wondered why these facts had impressed her so little. Perhaps it was because she had seen Ammy every day that she had been so slow to note the change that had taken place in her. She *was* painfully thin, and her face had an odd, wasted, drawn look. She had always been gay and cheerful by temperament, and now one was apt to take it for granted and not realise what a strain that very gaiety and cheerfulness must be to her now.

"I wish you weren't going," continued Mrs. Porter, "she depends on you, you cheer her. I'm too anxious and I only worry her. But then she's my only child and she's all I've got in the world." The tears stood in her eyes.

Gillian could only say as she had done to Amayllis: "Perhaps I shall not stay away many weeks. And if you really think she wants me to come back you must send for me."

"I wish you were not going," repeated Mrs. Porter in a melancholy tone, "Ammy clings to you somehow. When I think how splendidly strong she's always been it breaks my heart to see her now!"

Gillian drove round to Belgrave Square that same evening for the purpose of taking leave of the Pallants. Although neither Lady Pallant nor Joan had

taken any notice of her since the rupture of her engagement to Paul, nevertheless Gillian thought it would be more polite to go and see them and inform them of her impending departure. In the drawing-room she found Joan sitting with her mother. Both were knitting vigorously.

"I've come to say good-bye," said Gillian. "I'm going to France on Wednesday to help Mrs. Carrington with her little hospital." She felt nervous as she made this speech in a hurried almost inaudible voice.

Lady Pallant said, just as Amaryllis had done:

"Who in the world is Mrs. Carrington?"

"She—she was introduced to me by a friend," said Gillian, flushing a little. "She is a Catholic, and as she was just starting this hospital she asked me to go and help her."

"Well, I am glad to hear that you are going to do something useful at last, Jill," said Mrs. Grant in a firm tone of voice, exactly as if she were speaking to a child.

But Lady Pallant was occupied with quite another issue.

"One hears that always about Roman Catholics," she said, "that they cling together. Where does she live?"

"In Curzon Street," said Gillian.

"Oh, I think I've heard of her," said Lady Pallant, "quite a fanatic, I believe, in her own line. It was she who persuaded Lady Ida Middleford's girl to become a Catholic. It caused quite a family feud and no end of trouble and worry, but then they never seem to take people's feelings into account."

"Jill is very lucky to be taken up by such a rich, powerful woman," pronounced Joan with a touch of malicious asperity in her voice; "of course if you get into the exclusive Catholic set through her you will

do very well. You will find it a great improvement upon the Upper Bohemia you used to have at your house when you were first married. You must try and manage it somehow."

"I don't think we shall see much society of any kind at Les Sables," said Gillian dryly.

"What a pity you haven't been through any course," continued Joan; "now if you had only followed my advice and example and got your Red Cross certificates, you would have been of far more use in a hospital."

"I am not going to nurse—Mrs. Carrington is only employing trained women. I'm to help her with the housekeeping and the linen," said Gillian.

Even she was a little astonished at the definite hostility of Joan's manner. But it gave her a pretext for shortening her visit.

"I shall be so glad to feel I'm doing something," she said brightly as she got up to go. "I have been a drone so long."

Paul's name was not mentioned. She longed to ask if they had had news of him, for since he went away he had not once written to her. Perhaps it was better so, but she had somehow hoped they would speak of him.

When she had gone Joan said to her mother:

"What an extraordinarily lucky woman Jill is. She always falls on her feet. People—really nice people too—take such fancies to her. I can't understand it."

Lady Pallant at any other time would have smiled acidly at the shortness of her daughter's memory.

"This Mrs. Carrington will soon find out how utterly incompetent she is," continued Joan disdainfully. Then, after a pause during which Lady Pallant continued to knit vigorously, she inquired: "Shall you tell Paul that she's going to Les Sables?"

"I haven't made up my mind," said Lady Pallant.
"But I should think she would tell him herself."

"Oh, do you think they still write to each other?"
said Joan.

Lady Pallant shook her head.

"One can never tell with Paul," she said, "he's devoted to her, and nothing she can ever do or say will change him. I dare say he goes on hoping against hope."

CHAPTER XXXII

THE winter—the first terrible winter of the Great War—dragged on with seemingly interminable length. Gillian spent it at Les Sables, a place which she had visited long ago with Aylmer when they had spent a few weeks there for sea-bathing and golf, and which was now transformed out of all recognition. All the huge hotels as well as the little villas and painted chalets were turned into ambulances. No longer a place of pleasure, it could have rivalled one of Dante's grim circles of Hell as an abode of pain. The hordes of rich people who had been accustomed to invade it during the summer months were elsewhere employed; the surviving men fighting gallantly in the trenches, the women tending the wounded, the sick, and the children.

Sea and sands, pine-woods and pale blanchèd lines of sand-dunes where the dark coarse grass waved like long hair combed back by the wind, made up the desolate winter landscape. Often the grey sea was veiled and shrouded with mist; often it was stirred to violent fury by the storms that beat upon the coast. At night the wind sobbed at the windows of the little chalet-hospital, like a desolate and stricken soul pleading for admission.

Looking back upon that long winter those who suffered from anxiety and bereavement—and there were many who bore uncomplainingly the double cross—might well wonder how they could have lived through a time of such profound and poignant anguish. The very flower of England fought and fell upon the fields of Flanders and France. . . .

Gillian became more and more busy as the days went on. Mrs. Carrington was ill for some weeks during the month of January, and she left things

almost entirely in Gillian's hands. She had acquired, too, sufficient knowledge and experience to give a good deal of assistance in the wards. She seemed to herself in those days to have become completely detached from her old life and to have made a fresh start. She received very few letters from England, for Lady Pallant never wrote, and Miss Letty, who knew without doubt what her sister would have said had she lived to see their niece become a Catholic, only occasionally sent her a formal and stiff little note to show her that she was not forgotten although she was still in disgrace.

It was not till May that she returned to London, summoned thither by Mrs. Porter. Ammy's son had made his appearance, and the accounts of Mrs. Sprot were unsatisfactory. She had begged that Gillian might be sent for.

"Do go for a few days," Mrs. Carrington had said. "I can look after things perfectly for a week or so, and you really need a holiday."

As soon as possible after her arrival Gillian went round to the flat in Knightsbridge which Mrs. Porter had inhabited ever since January with her daughter. The back windows had a pleasant view over the Park and it was in one of these rooms that Gillian found Mrs. Porter sitting alone. She looked tired out, and as if she had had no sleep for weeks.

"Oh, my dear Jill!" said Mrs. Porter, and burst into tears. She sobbed unrestrainedly for some minutes. At last she looked up and her face was disfigured with the sudden weeping.

"You shall see her presently," said Mrs. Porter, choking back her sobs with a great effort, "she's frightfully weak, but the doctor hasn't given up hope. . . ." She looked at Gillian piteously.

Before Mrs. Driscoll could answer the door opened and the nurse came into the room carrying

a white bundle in her arms. Gillian uncovered the tiny crumpled face. The baby was asleep. There was a curiously marked resemblance to his father, as is so often the case with a posthumous child.

She took him in her arms and kissed him so lightly on the forehead that he never stirred in his sleep. . . . A whole flood of reminiscences surged back to her heart. She envied Ammy. . . .

Mrs. Porter went quickly out of the room with a pale and now controlled face. Gillian guessed that she had gone back to her daughter. She turned to the nurse.

"I'm very sorry to hear such a bad account of Mrs. Sprot. Shall I be allowed to see her to-day?"

"She is very weak indeed, Mrs. Driscoll," said the nurse, "but you are to see her if she asks for you, and I don't think it can do her any harm. You know how brave she's been all along. It was only after the baby was born that her courage seemed suddenly to leave her. I know she had tried to keep up for the child's sake and it was perhaps too great a strain. She bore up splendidly all the time. But now——"

She made a gesture as if to convey to Gillian that Mrs. Sprot's wonderful vitality had vanished. "I've told her that the baby needs her now more than ever. I've told her she ought to try and get better because of him. But it's always the same answer: 'I'm too tired.'"

Mrs. Porter came back and standing on the threshold beckoned to Gillian.

"She is asking for you—she wanted to know if you had come."

The nurse said: "Try and say something to cheer her. She's awfully changed of course. . . ."

Gillian followed Mrs. Porter down the passage and into a room at the end. It was partially dark-

ened, but the sharp May sunshine stole through a chink of the shutters and made a long slanting line of gold across the pink carpet. Gillian went softly towards the bed. She had worked so hard in the wards in France that she felt almost like a professional nurse. As her eyes became accustomed to the dim light she was able to distinguish the details of Ammy's forlorn appearance.

She thought she had never seen any one so pitifully changed. Ammy's round, sunburnt, boyish little face had become drawn and thin, and in color it was of a curious transparent waxen hue, neither yellow nor white. Her eyes were sunken and were surrounded by heavy dark circles. She looked like a dying woman.

There are killed and wounded by war of whom no returns reach Downing Street.

The words rushed back irresistibly to Gillian's mind; she knew that Ammy was dying of her wounds just as surely as those mutilated soldiers she had tended in the hospital at Les Sables. . . .

She bent over her.

"Ammy dear," she said gently

But Ammy did not seem to hear.

"Dear Ammy—it's Jill. I've come to see you. . . ."

Amaryllis turned restless and sunken eyes towards her.

"I . . . wanted you——" she said.

But her face wore a puzzled expression as if she knew that she had wanted Gillian but could not remember why.

Gillian sat down by the bedside and stroked the thin and wasted hand that lay so still upon the counterpane. The little caress seemed to soothe Amaryllis; her face became more calm, less puzzled and anxious-looking.

Presently Gillian said:

"I've seen the baby, Ammy. What a beautiful little boy he is! You must feel very proud of your son."

Ammy opened her eyes again and fixed them steadily but languidly upon Mrs. Driscoll.

"Not now . . ." she said almost as if she were talking to herself, "not now. . . ." She smiled—the queer remote smile of dying people who are instinctively aware that they are passing away from the fret of temporal things, the joys, the sorrows, the hopes and the dreadful fears. "Too tired," she added below her breath. She spoke the last two words so low that Gillian only caught them with difficulty.

"Yes, you are tired now and no wonder, Ammy. But in a few days, dear, when you begin to get better——" Gillian's heart sank even as she uttered the brave, hopeful, commonplace words.

A curious look of effort came over Ammy's wasted face. Her lips opened. She was trying to speak, to collect her thoughts. Gillian waited in silence.

"You—tell—him—about Hengist——" Amaryl-lis said at last. "Don't let—him—forget. . . . I want him to know—when he is old enough—how his father died—why he died. . . . I kept all the letters. Don't let him forget."

She spoke the sentences in an abrupt jerky manner as if she had scarcely strength to utter the words.

"He's been christened—Hengist——" she added after a little pause. Her sunken blue eyes, which had been fastened upon Gillian's face, now closed drowsily.

The nurse came back into the room. After one glance at her patient she laid the infant in his cradle and went away. Ammy, disturbed by the little interruption, turned her head restlessly; she seemed to be

looking for something. Gillian fetched the baby and laid him very gently by his mother's side. She guessed the working of that wandering mother-mind. The baby slept on, making little grunts in his sleep, beautifully unconscious of the tragedy that was being enacted. Ammy opened her eyes again.

"When—he gets—old—enough—tell him."

The nurse returned accompanied by Mrs. Porter and the doctor. Gillian crept away to make place for them. The doctor laid his finger on Ammy's pulse but made no comment. He took a case from his pocket and thrust something into her arm. Even the sharp prick failed now to arouse her. Her eyes were closed; the waxen yellow-whiteness of her face had become a little grey. She looked like an elderly faded woman.

Gillian again joined the little group by the bedside. The doctor looked very grave. Mrs. Porter, who seemed to have guessed the truth, was stifling her sobs. The baby still lay sleeping on his mother's arm. When Ammy opened her eyes again she fixed them almost fiercely upon Gillian.

"Don't forget—to—tell—him——" Her lips framed rather than uttered the words. Her face was quite grey with a kind of livid unnatural pallor.

She never spoke again. Her head fell back on the pillow. The baby awoke and began to cry; the nurse took him in her arms and rocked him softly. Mrs. Porter's sobs burst forth unrestrained. She cried out: "Ammy—my darling—my darling child!"

Gillian turned away, the tears smarting in her eyes. She remembered Amaryllis's words spoken soon after the news of Hengist's death had reached her: "I shall teach him that his father's blood helped to pay for that freedom—that unsullied honour. . . ."

And his mother? Had she not paid too? . . .

CHAPTER XXXIII

GILLIAN remained with Mrs. Porter for more than a week, for she had entreated her not to desert her until after the funeral, when she herself intended to leave London for the summer, taking the baby with her. Gillian was very tired after being for so many months on uninterrupted duty, and the rest was welcome to her.

She had gone out one evening to take a little walk in the Park and was going towards Kensington, when on the opposite side of the road she saw a little group of three people advancing. As they drew nearer Gillian recognized them—they were indeed Joan and Paul and the pretty fair-haired Lady Blanche Ethan whom Lady Pallant had once wished that her son might marry. They did not see her, and Gillian hurried on, thankful to have passed unobserved. She had hardly dared to look at Paul, fearing that he would see her. She had not told the Pallants of her return, and now she felt thankful that she had not ventured to visit them.

But why was Paul back again at home? Had he been wounded? She had never seen his name in those terrible lists which every day seemed to become more long and terrible, bringing desolation to so many homes. Perhaps he had been ill. She turned back once and looked after them. Lady Blanche was walking between Joan and Paul. They were going rather quickly, and from this fact she gathered that Paul was not an invalid. For the moment her heart had beat so fast she could scarcely breathe. Now she felt a little cold and faint. It was the suddenness, the unexpectedness of it, that had been almost overwhelming. Perhaps her nerves had suffered during the past months of strenuous work, as well

as from the shock of poor Ammy's sudden death. If Paul had seen her. . . . Her thoughts turned to Lady Blanche. Was he going to marry her? Had he recognised that barrier Gillian had herself raised between them was an insurmountable one? She turned and hurried back to Mrs. Porter's abode in a disturbed and agitated frame of mind.

All night she was haunted by the pale stern beauty of his face, the dark melancholy, reproachful eyes, the cold pride of his manner. It seemed to her now as if a whole world separated them. She was forgotten by Paul. . . . While the thought of his un-failing love and tender fidelity had helped her through the worst hours of their enforced separation he had been slowly forgetting her. No word had broken the silence that was now more than seven months old. She had never felt so completely separated from him during all that long and tragic winter as she did now after seeing him again almost face to face. Gillian sobbed herself to sleep that night. Her only consolation lay in the fact that she knew Paul to be safe in London.

She was glad when the day came for her to return to Les Sables. Although Mrs. Carrington had written to beg her to take a longer holiday she insisted upon going back on the day she had originally fixed. Her eagerness to leave London was intense. She could not face leisure and idleness that brought to her only thoughts of Paul. Her salvation lay in hard physical work, producing such bodily fatigue as left her with little choice when the day was done but to fall asleep, and sleep heavily till morning came. She was not often on night duty, for Mrs. Carrington judged her to be too delicate for the more arduous side of a nurse's career.

If she had ever had any hope that, being free, Paul would marry her, that hope had suddenly died.

It was as if a new and even more impregnable barrier had arisen between herself and Paul. Once looking idly through the pages of a book she had come upon these words: "*All my thoughts run to your service, they seem to hear you call, only to find locked doors.*" They expressed her own condition of mind with a detailed and poignant exactitude that was almost heart-breaking. She had never before felt so sensible of those locked doors—deliberately locked against her.

She came to lean more and more upon the support offered her by her religion. Mrs. Carrington had arranged an altar in the largest ward, and there Mass was said daily. Gillian very seldom failed to be present. And she was never so tired but that she contrived to say her rosary for Paul's safety before she fell asleep. And always upon first awakening she prayed to his angel-guardian to "enlighten and guide, protect and direct him," through the day that was just born.

Gillian learned, too, something of the inherent piety of the French soldier. Scarcely a man was brought thither who did not display suspended round his neck the badge or medal of the Sacred Heart. In those days spent in the hospital the realities of her faith were brought home to her. She knew what it could do for the living, the dying, and the dead. There was no kind of anguish, physical or mental, which its divine consolations could not assuage. She felt that if she had not already been a Catholic her experiences in France must have made her one. She had been told that there had been many conversions among the English troops, both officers and men, and the news scarcely surprised her. When the history of the war came to be written it was said that the French soldier-priests would have stories to tell that were at once beautiful and strange.

"Gillian, you are working much too hard. And I don't think you take enough rest," Mrs. Carrington said to her one day. "I wish you would lie down this afternoon. I never meant you to do the work of two women when I asked you to come."

"Nurse Thomas isn't well," answered Gillian with an attempted briskness, "her hand's bad. I'm afraid it's poisoned and she's got a temperature. I'm going to do duty for her, and help with changing the *pansements*."

"Some day I shall insist upon your going for a proper holiday," said Mrs. Carrington, "I don't want you to knock yourself up and lose your pretty looks, Gillian."

Gillian smiled. There was perfect sympathy between the two women, and though they had not known each other long they had been thrown together in an intimacy which made them feel as if they were very old friends. Indeed their relations might almost have been those of mother and daughter. It was strange that this new friend should have so fully and beautifully supplied all Gillian's need of friendship and sympathy, giving her exactly what she required as if in delicate compensation for the loss of that great love she had been compelled to sacrifice.

Mrs. Carrington had noticed the change that had taken place in her during the short time of her stay in England. She felt that something had happened, something that was not connected with the very natural grief she had felt at Mrs. Sprot's death. All the hope seemed to have died out of her face, leaving it almost pathetically sad. Every moment of her day was occupied. She worked as people do who refuse to allow themselves leisure for thought.

Once Ian Frazer paid them a visit on his way home. He had been given a commission for bravery in the field, but he was suffering from rheumatism,

and was returning home for a few weeks' sick leave. He was, however, full of hope at the prospect of an early return to the trenches.

"I don't say they're nice places," he said to Gillian with a smile, "but I do say that no man ought to feel happy or satisfied anywhere else."

He was shocked at the news of Ammy's death which had not reached him. Gillian told him about it. Scarcely a year had passed since they had all been together at Assisi, and humanly speaking it had certainly seemed that Ammy with her splendid health and physique had many years of happy life in front of her. No shadow of the tragedy had appeared then to darken the serene horizon. Europe had lain basking in a peace that held no presage of coming calamity. Ammy and her husband had been but two insignificant victims in the gigantic sum of dead. They had been simply swept away in the very fulness of their youth and strength, as young trees are flung to earth and uprooted by the advancing storm.

"Poor Mrs. Porter seemed very devoted to the baby," said Gillian. "I hope it may comfort her to look after him. She has left London on purpose that he may have country air."

"And you yourself, Mrs. Driscoll? I hope you're not overdoing it. You're looking rather pale and thin."

"Oh, I'm never very fat," said Gillian, flushing a little.

"I'm sure Mrs. Carrington takes care of you?" he said.

"She is most awfully kind and thoughtful for every one but herself. We are great friends," Gillian answered.

"Ah, I thought you would be," he said. "I felt sure you would get on together. One often makes

mistakes about these things, I know, but I did feel pretty sure about this."

He went away feeling quite satisfied about Gillian. There was no least touch about her now of that old rebellion. She had been severely, even sharply, handled in the House of the Potter, had submitted to the agony of that new shaping with a resignation and patience he could not but perceive with admiration. He thought she had emerged from that fiery ordeal more beautiful than ever.

Summer had come to Les Sables, and with it calm seas and softer airs. The gorse had broken into gold in the pine-woods and upon the dunes. A few bathers were sometimes to be seen, women and children who had come to spend the summer as usual at Les Sables. But there was none of the gaiety in the scene that there had been in past years. Even the children played their games in a quiet, subdued fashion. Some of them wore black frocks and suits that spoke of personal tragedy. Gillian watched them sometimes with aching heart.

One evening she had gone alone for a walk on the shore. It was a beautiful June evening, nearing the hour of sunset. Already the wide stretch of sand was becoming a glimmering space of gold, almost as luminous and fluid-looking as the turquoise and silver sea that lay beyond. The pine-woods lay like dark shadows beyond the pallor of the dunes. The day had been hot, but now a cool brackish air had sprung up. It revived Gillian, who had been on duty for many hours in the wards, for a new batch of wounded had come in that day, and their hands had all been full. It was a relief to come out and breathe the fresh and sweet summer air. Gillian walked on briskly, pausing from time to time to watch the little blue and white waves breaking and tumbling over

each other with white cascades of foam that shone like snow as they touched the yellow 'sand. Over there to the west the sun was setting behind the hidden English cliffs.

There were little pools in the sand; here and there a tress of red seaweed lay like wet hair on the golden ribbed surface; the waves creeping stealthily shorewards sent little curling lace-like fringes to encircle the dark gleaming rocks.

Gillian looked at her watch. It was growing late, and she turned to retrace her steps. She had thought she was quite alone; there had seemed no one at all about; now she was aware that the figure of a man, blackly silhouetted against the gold and blue, was coming slowly towards her. A slight spare figure, most familiar, and—most dear.

It was Paul Pallant. . . .

Gillian stood quite still and her limbs trembled as he came towards her. Her first feeling was one of anger and indignation that he should have dared to come and seek her at Les Sables after those months of silence. Perhaps he had come to tell her definitely of his approaching marriage to Blanche Ethan. She felt certain that only the stress of some great and urgent necessity could have brought him hither. Yet why had he not written? Surely it would have been easier to write news of that kind than to come in person to disclose it. . . .

Now he was quite close to her; he could see that she recognized him, but still he did not speak. He stood and looked at her with an expression in his eyes that she felt she could never forget—a look of love and most patient longing that touched her heart. Had he come, in spite of all things, because he could not stay away any longer? Had all his resolutions broken down? If that were the reason he had no right to subject her also to this torture.

In the silence that followed they could hear the sleepy murmur of those breaking baby-waves, the low sighing of the wind in the pine trees, the sharp shrill, frightened cries of the sea-gulls that swept and circled above their heads.

Often and often he had come to her thus in her dreams; now the splendid cruel reality seemed scarcely less phantom-like. She drew a little away, shrinking from the arms he suddenly outstretched.

"Oh, Paul—why have you come? I was trying to forget you——" Her voice was hoarse with the effort she was making to keep back her sobs.

"Jill . . . Jill . . . beloved . . ." he said. He put his arms round her, for now she was swaying a little, as if to support her. Her darling head was against his shoulder; their lips met.

And his voice was whispering strange, passionate, incomprehensible, unbelievable words in her ear.

"Jill—Jill you are mine now. Do you hear that, my darling? There's nothing between us any more. . . . You are free, and you are mine. . . . I've come here to claim my darling bride. . . ." He uttered softly again and again words of the same purport, as if determined that she should realise and understand. "Darling—speak to me. Say that you do love me still. Say that these months of separation haven't changed your heart. . . ."

She moaned again: "Oh, why have you come? You must be mad to come back like this. You must never try to see me again. . . ."

"Then you don't love me?" He loosened his hold of her. He stood in front of her, dark, stern, reproachful. "All those reasons you gave me last autumn for not marrying me were only excuses to hide the fact that you'd ceased to care?"

"My reasons still hold good," she said coldly; "it

can make no difference whether I care for you or not. I cannot marry you."

"Is it possible," he said, "that you haven't heard?"

She was conscious now that he was looking at her with a very strange and curious expression.

Some dim suspicion of the truth was awakened within her mind. It fluttered there, indeterminate, formless.

"That I have not heard?" she said.

"Aylmer is dead," he said gravely. "I thought of course you knew. He was smashed up on his motorcycle last week while carrying dispatches. He died on Saturday at Boulogne."

"Was—was Deborah with him?" she asked. Her face was very white. He could see that the news had shocked her profoundly.

"No—she said that she couldn't leave her father. But it seems he told the doctor—whom I have seen—that his wife couldn't stand horrors, and that he was afraid she would refuse to come. Can you believe any woman could be so utterly selfish as all that?"

"Did he suffer very much?" she asked.

The past, remote now but still irrevocable and dominating, held her in its grip.

"At first—but they kept him under morphia. He was full of pluck, they said, very anxious about his dispatches, which were luckily quite safe."

Paul took Gillian's hands in his and wondered why they were so cold.

"Jill dear," he said, "I felt I must come to-day and there was no time to write. I saw Mrs. Carrington for a moment and she told me you had gone for a walk along the shore." He looked at her wistfully. "I've just got a fortnight's leave. At any other time I shouldn't dare ask you to marry me—I know it's too soon and all that. But now . . . We have waited a long time, haven't we, Jill? I want you to

come back to England with me to-morrow. . . .”
His eyes searched her face.

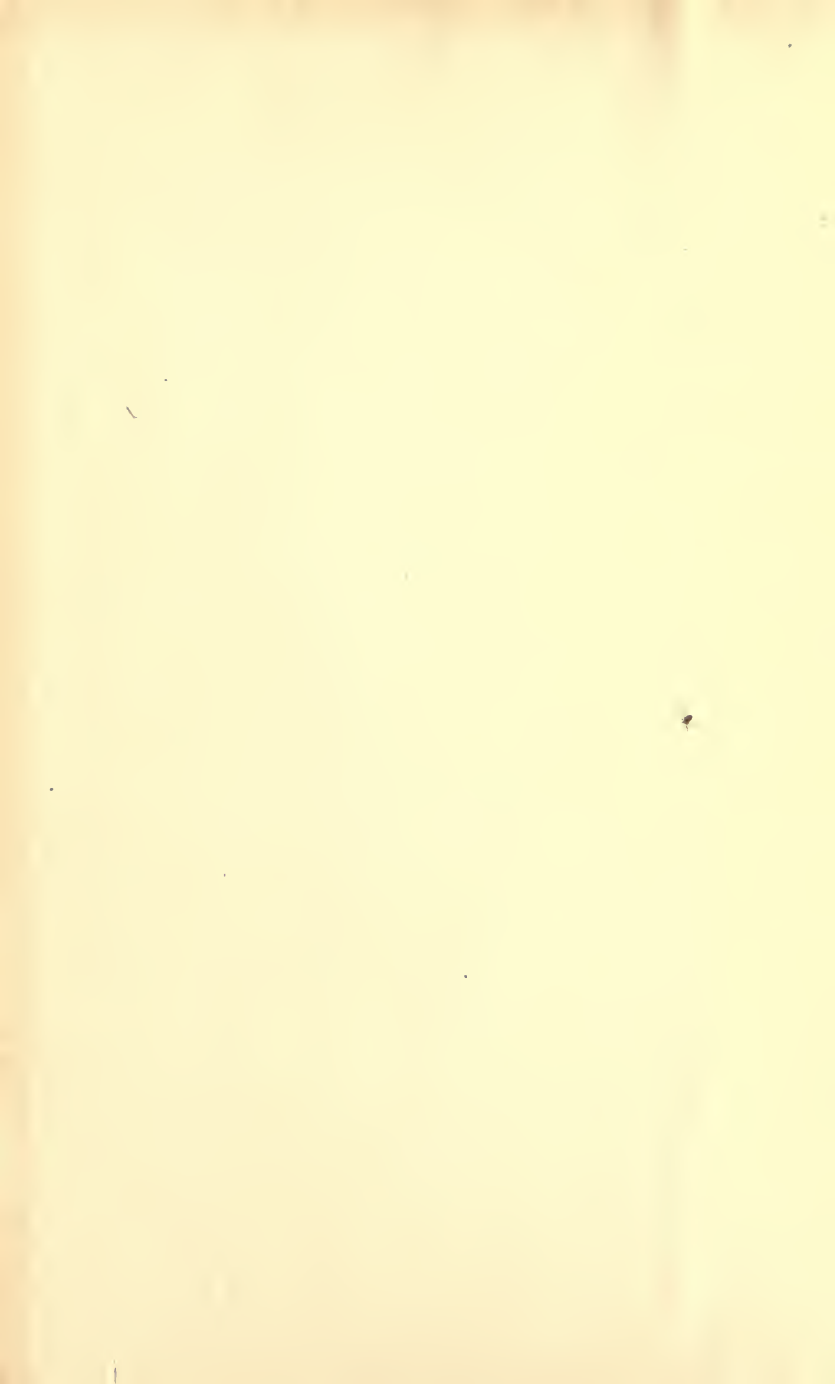
All the barriers had melted away. She could feel pity for the dead man who had once loved her and who had died, abandoned and deserted by the woman for whom he had left her. She was free now to love and marry Paul. She moved a step nearer to him and her face in the evening light seemed to him almost transfigured.

“I will come, Paul,” she said softly.

THE END

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